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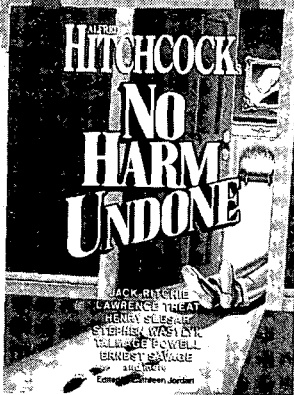
**A LONG
WALK HOME**

by Stephen
Wasylyk

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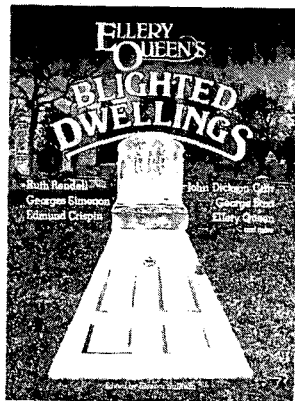
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Ghosts and private eyes make strange bedfellows, but they've been keeping company in our offices lately. Suspense, however, has overcome them both.

In case you imagine a bunch of overwrought ghosts and P.I.'s filling every chair in the place and wringing their hands, we hasten to explain. We've been counting votes.

The votes in question were cast by some 400 of our newsstand readers who participated in a questionnaire in AHMM last fall (remember that yellow card in the October issue?). One of the things we were interested in was what kinds of stories you like best, this time through a questionnaire specifically designed for newsstand buyers. In it we listed six categories of stories: the classic whodunit, the private eye story, the police procedural, espionage, suspense, and ghost or horror stories. Readers were asked to rank them from 1 to 6, with 1 being the most preferred.

From the responses we received, we've come up with the following:

Suspense is the *most* popular, with the classic whodunit a very close second.

Espionage was *least* popular.

You like ghost stories or you don't.

The private eye tale garnered perhaps medium enthusiasm, but it overcame the hot/cold ghost reaction (are there such things as hot ghosts?).

Practically nobody doesn't like suspense.

To be more specific, all the points awarded each kind of story were added up (1 point for a first choice, 2 points for a second choice, and so on). By that method, the category with the fewest total points won first place and vice versa. The following tallies emerged:

Suspense	12%
Classic whodunit	12%
Private eye	16%
Ghost or horror	17%
Police procedural	20%
Espionage	23%

Moreover, we took a special look at the number of votes that were cast in each "place." It turned out that the classic who-

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dunit, with 127, the ghost story, with 104, and suspense, with 95, got the most *first* choices, by a distinct margin. The private eye story got 42 first choices, the procedural 15, espionage 18.

And for least favorite, espionage, with 170, the ghost story, with 118, and the procedural, with 72, got the most *last* choices. (Private eyes came in with 23, the classic whodunit with 15, and suspense with 3 last place votes.)

So now we'd like to hear from you again. For instance, tell us why the police procedural and espionage did least well. (Cops and spies make people uneasy? The stories tend to be more muted in tone, given their usual format? Or what?) Second, we'd like comment on this question: If the classic whodunit typically has a series character and the suspense story typically doesn't, does the (slight) pref-

erence for the latter mean that nothing—not even a familiar and attractive continuing character—beats good edge-of-the-chairness? Or what?

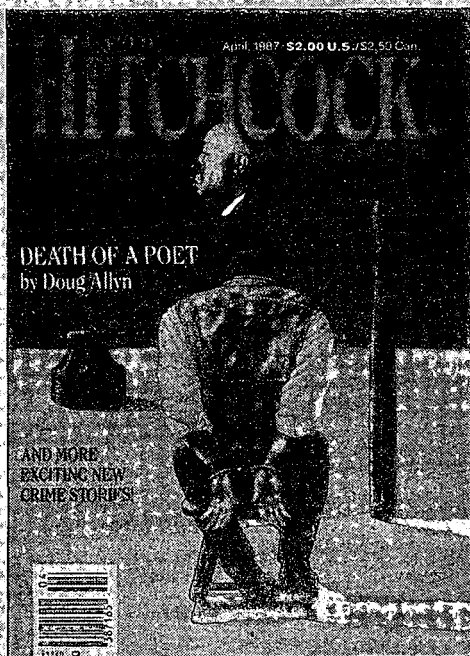
In your replies, by the way, please let us know if you do *not* want us to print your letter, as otherwise we might be able to do so, space permitting.

Finally, we should note that there were some questionnaires we couldn't count (some people only put a few undifferentiated checks, for instance) but we did appreciate the comments of those people who just told us they liked *all* the categories equally well, and suspect that many others feel pretty much the same way. Rankings of this sort are often artificial, and we do know that—so espionage fans, don't despair! (though we don't get many such submissions, actually).

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A Long Walk Home

by Stephen Wasylyk



Illustration by Janet Aulisio

The thirteen year-old future major league outfielder had been bouncing a rubber ball off the driveway wall of the sun-splashed yellow brick apartment house for almost an hour. Most of the rebounds returned to his waiting hands. Now and then the ball caught a projecting brick and caromed off at an odd angle, the *whmppf* of the ball and the slapping of his pursuing sneakers loud in the morning stillness.

Across the street, a kneeling Edna retrieved another tulip bulb from her carefully tended bed in the center of the lawn, brushed it off, and handed it to Barney.

"Arctic White."

Impressed into service by his rotund, blue-haired wife to keep the dun colored bulbs separated properly during this biannual ritual, Barney repeated the name dutifully as he dropped it into a labeled paper sack.

Whmppf.

The ball zoomed over the boy's blond head and lodged in a tall hedge that separated the driveway from the side lawn of the house next door. Painted white and trimmed in green, the two story stucco sat in a postcard-pretty setting of foundation plantings, full blooming flower beds, and several large oaks. As a further shield against the intrusive ugliness of the

apartment house, the back yard was screened from view by an interlocking border of evergreens.

"Golden Towers," said Edna.

Barney turned the bulb over in his fingers. "Yellow."

Thirty years of marriage had taught Edna when to ignore him.

Whmppf.

"He'd better hope that ball doesn't go over the hedge and into the Farleys' yard," said Barney. "Mrs. Farley screaming at him will frighten him into taking up poker."

"Not unless she can do it from beyond the grave."

He brushed the dirt from the bulb she handed him. "She's dead?"

"That's the only way to get there. After all, she was ninety-five. She died last week, while you were away playing fisherman."

He dropped the unidentified bulb into the Golden Towers bag. If it turned out to be Regent Red, she'd have a nice surprise. "There was no viewing or funeral?"

"For whom? The only people with an interest were Marcie and Howard."

"A few of the neighbors would have turned up."

She gave a ladylike snort. "Not likely. Why should you care, anyway?"

"Doesn't seem right. The day I left, she was giving a few kids royal hell for making too much noise. Maybe she was the neighborhood irritant, but she managed to get to ninety-five, which is more than most of us do. She deserved a better send-off, even if we came only to applaud."

"Queen of the Night," said Edna.

Barney considered the bulb thoughtfully.

"Sounds like a high-priced call girl."

Edna glared at him.

Whmppf.

The ball came bouncing across the street to where John Henry, silently watching and wondering why the stupid boy insisted on throwing the ball against the wall when a dog was available to chase after and fetch it for him, immediately snapped it up in his teeth, tail wagging, indicating his willingness to play.

The boy stopped short, eyeing him warily. Tail wagging or not, John Henry was big, black, and formidable enough to discourage anyone's disputing ownership of anything he decided to appropriate.

Barney held out his hand. "Give."

John Henry looked at him in disbelief, the sternness in Barney's voice telling him it wasn't

play time after all. Reluctantly, he dropped the wet ball into Barney's hand.

Barney tossed it back to the boy with an easy grace he thought his muscles had forgotten.

"Not bad for an old man," he said.

Edna handed him another bulb. "Seems more trouble than it's worth."

"I've been saying that for years."

"Not the tulips," she said wearily. "The boy."

"You've forgotten the imagination of youth. He isn't bouncing the ball off the wall. He's playing center field in the World Series."

She wagged a finger at the bulb. "Pink Glory."

He was tempted to slip it into Arctic Giant.

"Still think that Mrs. Farley's departure should have been observed with a little formality."

She handed him the last bulb and rose, brushing off the knees of her slacks. "Not our business, Barney. And she wasn't just the neighborhood irritant. She was a sharp-tongued, extremely selfish woman and a perfect example of only the good die young."

She waved at the bulb. "Regent Red. Are you sure you didn't mix up any of the colors?"

"Absolutely," he lied. "I'll see you later. I need a haircut before the wedding."

"What about finishing that clock you've been making as a gift for Denise?"

"Maybe I won't give it to her."

"I wouldn't be surprised. You haven't given one away yet."

"Only because I'm not giving my clocks to airheads. They can buy plastic ones in K-Mart."

"I just happened to think, Barney, that Howard waited for Marcie for thirty years. Would you have waited that long for me?"

"Only if you promised not to grow tulips."

He snapped his fingers at John Henry. The dog fell into step at his left heel.

As they reached the sidewalk, the boy made a spectacular one-handed catch, whirled and threw as though trying to catch a runner trying to score.

Barney had no idea of where he imagined home plate might be because the ball was headed nowhere in particular until it caught a projecting light bracket on the apartment house wall, flew over the hedge into the Farleys' yard, ricocheted from an oak trunk, and headed toward the rear of the house.

John Henry streaked across the street, brushed by the boy, and caught up with the still rolling ball. He spun with it in

his teeth. This *had* to be play time.

The boy turned to appeal to Barney.

Barney crossed to the other sidewalk. "John Henry!"

Tail wagging, the dog started back. Halfway, he paused, head moving from side to side, snout low. He dropped the ball and backtracked, nose an inch off the ground, following an invisible trail to a flower bed under a window and then to the back of the house. Intriguing odors always made him forget what he'd been doing.

The door of the house burst open and a stocky, sandy-haired, elderly man ran out, yelling at the boy in a furious, high-pitched voice.

Barney sighed. Mrs. Farley in her prime couldn't have done better.

The boy cautiously backed away and fled. The ball could be replaced. His life couldn't.

John Henry was still roaming the lawn at the side of the house, nose low, tail wagging. Whatever his sensitive nose had picked up, it pleased him.

Barney whistled. The man glanced at him, turned and saw the dog for the first time. Waving his arms and yelling, he charged at the precise moment John Henry decided to obey Barney's whistle.

A hundred pounds of well-

muscled black dog coming head on at full speed converted fury into terror in a split second.

The man screamed and threw himself to one side as John Henry streaked by to take his position at Barney's heel.

Barney lifted a hand. "Sorry, Howard."

Howard raised a trembling forefinger and yelled, "You keep him out of here, do you hear, Barney? If I catch him here again, I'll shoot him."

Barney beckoned.

Howard came to within ten feet.

"Don't ever say that again, Howard," said Barney slowly. "Don't even think it."

Howard opened his mouth, saw something in Barney's face, swallowed, and said, "You're right, Barney. I was upset."

"I understand. Mrs. Farley's passing away must have been a shock."

Howard nodded. "Hit Marcie hard. That's why I'm here."

"You don't have to explain. After all, you've been keeping company with her for a long time. Hell, you ought to simply move in. Mrs. Farley just pass away?"

"No, Barney. She fell. Wasn't really much of a fall. Only the last three steps, Marcie said, but at her age it didn't take much. There was nothing I could do. I called the doctor. She's

dead, I told him, no sense in even taking her to the hospital. Had to be done, he said. Couple of minutes later the ambulance came. I went with it. Doctor in the emergency room told me she was dead, as if I didn't already know. Whitman, the funeral director, picked her up the morning after the autopsy. I thought she'd hit her head but they said it was her heart. We buried her that afternoon. Marcie didn't want any fuss, you know?"

Barney nodded. "Tell her she has my condolences. And listen, Howard, maybe it's none of my business, but why don't you and Marcie get away from here? Take a long trip together. Don't even wait to get married. I'll keep an eye on the house for you."

Howard looked down the tree-lined street, a weariness in his eyes. "Nice of you, Barney, but we really can't right now. Maybe later."

"The offer is always good. Take care, Howard."

Howard nodded and hurried into the house.

Barney glanced down at John Henry. "Since you've caused enough trouble for the day, do you think you can behave at the barber shop?"

John Henry's tail indicated assent.

Barney walked slowly. He

really couldn't blame Marcie and Howard for being in a hurry to bury Mrs. Farley. When he and Edna had bought the house, Marcie had been a pleasant, goodlooking woman and just about ready to marry Howard. Then her mother had a heart attack, so the wedding was postponed. And postponed. And postponed. Some time later, Edna had learned Mrs. Farley had extracted a promise from them that they would never marry as long as she was alive because she needed Marcie. It might have seemed a reasonable commitment at the time, but neither Marcie nor Howard imagined she would live for another thirty years and never release Marcie from that promise.

Barney had no doubt that they had anticipated each year to be her last and so did nothing, and when finally they looked around, most of their lives had quietly passed by.

He had watched Marcie age until she looked older than Edna, had seen Howard arrive faithfully twice a week for their dates, which were spent talking to each other in the living room. Neither ever went anywhere except out to dinner, with Mrs. Farley as a creaking chaperone.

Edna often said Howard was a saint to wait for Marcie that

long, but Edna would go to her grave naive about a great many things. Thirty years was a long time for the old woman to hang on. The first few wouldn't have mattered, the next a source of irritation, the last full of so much hate it could have been packaged and sold by the pound. If there was anything saintly about Howard, it was that he hadn't force-fed the old woman the wrong medication at the wrong time years ago.

It was no wonder they had buried her as quickly as they could. In Howard's shoes, he'd have helped dig the grave with a smile on his face.

But Howard wasn't smiling, and that was odd because he certainly couldn't be grief-stricken.

The barber shop was at the end of a small, low brick building that was an island of commercial development in the suburban residential neighborhood.

It also held a small delicatessen, a drugstore, a dry cleaning shop, and a real estate office. A narrow, dreary alley ran behind it, an eyesore and an anathema to the surrounding residents and a magnet for every dog within a mile.

Three months ago, the usual irritations of the alley had become secondary to the presence

of a drab, silent, middle-aged woman named Jessie. Institutionalized for years simply because her mental growth had ceased during childhood, she had been released with many others by a judge who ruled confinement was a violation of their rights.

She had appeared one morning and taken up residence in the boiler room which provided heat for the building's tenants; a slightly built woman of indefinite age who spent most of her day shuffling aimlessly about the neighborhood.

As often as Sergeant Corcoran drove her back to the home she had been assigned to along with four others who had been returned to live in the community, she reappeared, somehow safely negotiating the long walk necessary to reach the alley.

Legal efforts to have her removed had been dropped after the building owner had been prevailed upon to furnish the boiler room as a small apartment, several church groups supplied a cadre of women who looked after her, and a county social worker was assigned to cart her off once a week for a bath, physical examination, and change of clothing.

Offers of more suitable living quarters by a few of the more good-hearted were ignored.

Whatever her reasons, Jessie preferred to remain where she was.

Only a few things managed to penetrate beyond the bewildered eyes, one of them John Henry's presence, which always brought a brief, tender head stroking.

Looking forward to that, the dog took off ten yards from the alley and skidded around the hedge that concealed it from the adjacent houses, but when Barney cleared the hedge, he was trotting back and forth uncertainly.

Barney whistled him to his side. "Maybe she went for a walk. You can check again on the way home."

Sal Melchiorre, napping in the barber's chair with his hands tented on his chest, opened one eye.

"About time someone showed up. I was beginning to think I was back in the sixties when it was a crime to get a haircut."

"Fads come and go," said Barney, "and that one isn't due again for another ten years. Where's your assistant?"

"Home with a cold. I didn't want him breathing on my customers. How was I to know I wouldn't have any?"

John Henry settled in the corner, his chin on his paws.

"Looks sad," said Sal.

"He was expecting to see

Jessie, but she wasn't there."

Sal always fastened the neckband as though he was practicing for an eventual strangulation of a customer he didn't like.

"Being away fishing, you may not have heard. Jessie's been gone for about a week."

"Corcoran take her back to the home?"

"Absolutely not. He was in the other day, asking when I'd last seen her. I really didn't know. Seen her go by so often, I didn't pay attention."

The electric clippers buzzed at the nape of Barney's neck.

"Sounds a little odd," he said.

"I don't know. The social worker says it happens. The psychiatrist told her Jessie might have left because she found a place that makes her feel more secure."

The trimmer buzzed around Barney's ear.

"Hear your neighbor died," said Sal. "The old Farley woman."

"So I was informed a short while ago."

"Whitman, the funeral director, told me it was the fastest funeral he ever handled. Would have been faster but the paperwork slowed him down. Ever realize how hard it is to get out of this world, Barney?"

Regarding the heavy-set, gray haired man in the mirror, Barney considered that expe-

rience as approaching much too quickly.

"I've never heard of people standing in line to check out as if they were in a supermarket."

"I'm talking about the paperwork the government demands to prove that you're dead. The politicians let no taxpayer go without a fight. Now with people like Jessie, it's different. They couldn't care less."

The scissors clacked steadily.

"I hope no one harmed her, Barney. Corcoran said that there was talk that someone put her in a car and drove her so far away she'll never find her way back."

"I wouldn't like to think of anyone's doing that."

Sal spread warm lather on his nape, around his ears, and below his sideburns. Barney forced his mind elsewhere. Someone that close to him with a straight razor always made him uneasy.

"Neither would I. I didn't like to see her living back there because I think a person is entitled to more out of life. Yet she wouldn't stay in the home and wouldn't have anything to do with the people who offered her a place to live. What do you do with someone like that?"

"See that they have a warm place to sleep and enough to eat until someone comes up with a sensible solution."

Sal put the razor away and combed Barney's hair to coax a few stubborn strands from hiding.

"I used to watch her go by and wonder where she came from and if she had a family who could have taken care of her."

Barney smiled. Sal's thinking usually went no deeper than the daily major league scores.

"What do you think she was like as a kid, Barney?"

"The same as any other until she fell behind, I suppose."

She'd had a black dog, he knew that. The first time she'd seen John Henry, her face had softened and she said softly, "Boomer?" Then the softness was gone, the memory too difficult or painful to hold. The eyes became puzzled and the blankness in the lined face that had no age was back as though understanding was too difficult.

Sal brushed him off. "You look twenty years younger."

"Don't get carried away. You're only a barber, not a magician."

Barney inspected the haircut critically. "Since you didn't scalp me this time, I'll give you the key to success. Grow a mustache, paint the place pink, and change the sign on the window from Sal's Barber Shop to Mr. Salvatore's Hair Styling Salon."

"And if I do, where will you get your hair cut?"

Barney shrugged as he opened the door. "Edna isn't too old to learn how to cut hair."

John Henry made a cursory tour of the alley before catching up to him.

"She's gone," he said, "but don't give up hope. Corcoran might find her yet."

As they approached the house, the dog left his side and headed for the Farleys', tail wagging. Barney let him get there before whistling him back. John Henry had always instinctively avoided the Farley yard because Mrs. Farley hated dogs more than she hated children, but there was a rabbit warren deep under the hedges somewhere and it appeared that John Henry was narrowing down his perpetual search.

Ignoring Edna's comment about his haircut, Barney leaned against the kitchen wall.

"Have you seen Marcie since her mother died?"

"Of course. I went over to express my condolences."

"Did she impress you as being happy now that she and Howard are free?"

She stared at him. "Happy? Good Lord, Barney. Her *mother* passed away."

"A great loss, I'm sure. How *did* she look?"

"If you must know, I thought

she looked more worried than grief-stricken."

"Ah," said Barney.

"Ah, what?"

"Howard had the same look. What would those two have to worry about with Mrs. Farley gone?"

"Perhaps being alone together after all these years." She pointed toward his workshop in the garage. "The clock, Barney. If it isn't finished by this time tomorrow, I buy a wedding gift."

The pieces of the clock he had designed for Edna's grandniece lay in the center of his workbench, stained and varnished and needing only to be rubbed down to a glass-smooth luster before being assembled.

He preferred to finish his clocks that way, rather than after assembly when he had to contend with corners, crevices, and projecting surfaces.

Using his felt pad, rubbing oil, and rottenstone, he began to work, the varnish becoming lustrous and smooth, the beautifully grained cherry acquiring deepness and richness; examining each piece critically before setting it aside.

He was almost finished when someone tapped on the door jamb.

Corcoran and a blonde young

woman dressed in a tailored dark blue suit stepped inside.

The sergeant sounded apologetic. "Have a minute, Barney?"

"If you don't mind my talking while I keep rubbing. Edna is pushing me for this."

The young woman leaned over the polished pieces, eyes interested.

"This is Miss Eliot," said Corcoran. "She's the social worker handling Jessie's case."

Barney resumed rubbing. "Sal told me she disappeared."

"That's why we're here. I heard you were back from that fishing trip and thought you might be able to help."

Barney held the last piece up to the light, sighting across the glare for imperfections. "Why me?"

"You and John Henry tour the neighborhood twice a day when you take your walks. I thought you might have seen something."

Satisfied, Barney polished the wood with a dry cloth. "Not really. We did run into her occasionally but not for some weeks."

"Did it ever seem to you that there was a pattern to where you saw her?" asked Miss Eliot.

Dry-fitting the pieces together to be sure everything was perfect before he used the glue, Barney paused.

"What makes you think there might have been a pattern?"

Miss Eliot moved to get a better look at what he was doing.

"Let me tell you about her. Jessie is one of those people we lost because no one knew what to do with her. We don't really know exactly why she was institutionalized when she was a child because her records were destroyed in a fire, but we can guess because we have experience with others. Someone, a doctor or a psychiatrist, determined that her mental age would never progress much beyond the age of five or so. That diagnosis was a tragedy. What was really wrong with her was that she was a very slow learner. Teaching her required time and patience, but she could learn. With the proper instruction, she could have been capable eventually of getting about on her own and of doing simple work."

Barney reached for his lightweight clamps. "Could have been?"

"Could have been. She may have been handicapped, but she could still feel, and like all children she depended on those she loved. So she could be hurt. You can imagine how she felt when she was taken away from her family and placed in the institution. Lost. Confused. How could she know why she was

there? Then came the fire. The attendants she was close to died in it and it did something to her. There is no question that up until then, she knew her name and where she lived, but afterward she left that behind. Who she was and where she came from went with the people and the lost records, which were never really restored. She was lost through time, ignorance, and bureaucratic incompetence."

"No member of the family ever checked on her?"

"If there were any, no. With the records gone along with the people who knew her, she became simply Jessie Doe in the files and Silent Jessie to everyone. When she was sent to the private home, she constantly wandered away, perhaps because she has always been something of a rebel. When asked why, she would only mumble that she was looking for something. One day she ended up in that alley, and nothing could make her return. All we could get out of her was the word home. The psychiatrist thought that she was referring to the alley. Recently, I realized that it could mean more than that. This neighborhood might remind her of where she lived as a child and she was wandering around looking for her home. During the years she

spent in the institutionshe probably felt it no longer existed. Released, she realized it did."

The clock assembled and held lightly with clamps, Barney stepped back and eyed it critically. Almost eighteen inches high, the sides below the delicate face dipped and curved gracefully outward to bracket a small gallery.

Miss Eliot's eyes gleamed. "That *is* beautiful." She indicated the gallery. "A small vase with some bright flowers would be perfect here."

Barney smiled. Some people required no explanations.

"Neighborhoods change," he said. "A mind locked away for forty years wouldn't realize that. She might be completely confused."

"She might," said Corcoran. "Want to sell that clock?"

"I don't sell them. I give them away."

Corcoran grinned. "Not according to Edna. She says you have six in the house already."

"Only because when I met the people I made them for, I felt they wouldn't appreciate them. I don't consider them ordinary clocks. Not because they took a great deal of time, but because each is an original. There is only one like it in the world."

"I see your point," said Miss Eliot.

"All of which has nothing to do with Jessie's disappearance." Barney thrust his hands into his back pockets. "Why not ask from house to house?"

"I don't have the men for that," said Corcoran.

"Run a story in the weekly asking for information."

"The paper doesn't come out for three more days," said Miss Eliot.

"Barney!"

Edna's voice snapped across the yard.

He poked his head out of the door.

"John Henry is in the Farley yard. Better call him."

Barney sighed. He'd wondered where the self-appointed official greeter was. John Henry had always liked Corcoran.

They walked out to the street slowly.

"Keep your mind working on it, Barney," said Corcoran. "If anyone knows what goes on around here, you do."

"I resent being considered the neighborhood busybody."

"Don't mean that at all. It's just that you seem to have a way of turning up in the middle of things."

The dog was sitting before the Farley door as if he had come to call.

Barney whistled.

John Henry turned, saw Corcoran, and charged across the

street. He submitted to a few pats, his eyes on Miss Eliot. Nose away from her blue pumps, he circled her, tail going furiously.

She glanced at Barney. "What's he up to?"

"I have no idea. Where were you before you came here?"

"I stopped by to see if Jessie had returned."

"That's it. Any friend of Jessie's is a friend of his. What are the odds that Jessie originally came from around here?"

"Monumental. The psychiatrist considers my idea pure fantasy."

"But you're not convinced."

She smiled. "Jessie's had no formal schooling, but I suspect she knows a great deal more than anyone gives her credit for, even though it took her a long time to learn it. Why couldn't a few distant memories and a little female intuition have brought her to the right place?"

Barney decided he liked Miss Eliot. "The problem would seem to be, where is she?"

"It's an old neighborhood," said Corcoran. "Big houses, detached garages, always some people away. She could be holed up somewhere."

"How old is she?"

"We don't know exactly," said Miss Eliot. "Take fifty-five and go up or down a few years." She

handed him a card. "If you think of anything, please call me."

He went back to his workbench, took the clock apart, and began reassembling it, this time using the glue, the splines, and the concealed screws, working automatically, his mind elsewhere.

He had the impression that the pragmatic Corcoran was being gracious to the pretty Miss Eliot and believed that if Jessie had curled up with her memories somewhere a week ago, she was now dead, but there was no way to measure the indomitability of the human spirit. There were too many recorded instances of people who survived situations in which they should have died; courage, will power, and sheer stubbornness had nothing to do with learning ability. Jessie could have left the game a long time ago to sit and stare at images no one else would ever see, but she hadn't.

He set the clock aside for the glue to dry and called John Henry for their midday walk.

As he passed the houses, John Henry scouting before him for interesting odors, he realized that this neighborhood was perhaps more stable than many others. There were quite a few families who had been here before he moved in thirty years

ago and who would still be here after he had gone.

The tour ended, he found Edna at her desk reviewing her grocery list.

"That goodlooking friend of yours, Mrs. Martino. Still at the hospital?"

"Of course. Why?"

"I think I'll run over and talk to her."

"What in the world for?"

"You've been taking me for granted lately. It's time I had an affair."

"Good luck," said Edna.

The hospital had reduced all of its early records to microfilm. After he explained why he wanted to go through them, Mrs. Martino ignored the legalities and fed him the maternity ward reels one after another. An hour later, eyes tired and a headache building from deciphering blurred names, he found what he was hoping for, thanked Mrs. Martino, and drove to the municipal building.

After two hours more of eye-strain and headache, he called Miss Eliot.

He and John Henry were waiting for her when she drove up. "Sal, the barber, was talking about paperwork," he said. "Generally speaking, it's difficult to come into the world

without a record of it and impossible to leave without forms being filled out. If Jessie was born to someone in this neighborhood, chances were it took place in the local hospital. I checked. I found a Jessica born fifty-eight years ago to a family still here. I asked around. None of the older residents remembered seeing her grow up, and there is no record of her death. What happened to her? Sent to live with a relative?"

"Or in an institution," said Miss Eliot. "Let me have the address."

"Go slowly. This may be nothing or this may be something you won't ever want to remember. You may want to let Corcoran handle it."

"After five years in this job, there are no surprises or shocks left. I don't need Corcoran unless they refuse to talk to me."

"Let's find out," said Barney.

He took her arm and led her to the Farley front door and pushed the doorbell.

Marcie answered, a thin woman with a bony face, gray hair cut short.

Barney took a deep breath.

"You had a sister named Jessica," he said. "What happened to her?"

He had anticipated reactions ranging from complete puzzlement to full blown screaming to outright violence.

He hadn't anticipated Marcie's eyes rolling upward as she collapsed into Howard's arms, probably one of the few times she'd been there in thirty years.

A coldness clamped his chest. A week. A week was a long time. Maybe if he hadn't gone on that fishing trip—

Howard looked up, a dullness in his eyes. "Upstairs. In what she says is her room."

Barney retreated before officialdom arrived, he, Edna, and John Henry overlooking the minor traffic jam caused by Corcoran's cars and the others.

"I still don't believe it," said Edna.

"Then I'll repeat what Howard told me and you can ask questions. Marcie was only eight when two things happened. Her father left one morning and never returned. Shortly afterward, her mother took Jessie away and returned without her. Never explained a damn thing to Marcie except to keep telling her it was the two of them against the world and all they had was each other, which partially explains why Marcie made that promise. She forbade Marcie to ever mention her father or Jessie, and eventually Marcie assumed they were both dead and simply never thought about them. You'll remember

when we bought this house she told us her father had died years before."

"Good Lord. Mrs. Farley simply abandoned the child after her husband left."

"Condemned her if you like. No one knows why he deserted them, but I'd place no flowers on his grave, wherever that might be. He helped make her what she was and certainly did nothing for two small daughters. Howard, of course, had never heard of Jessie. About a week ago, she came to the front door. No one knows if she really remembered or simply selected the house at random, even though hitting the right one must have about the same odds against it as winning the state lottery. When Marcie answered the door, Jessie marched right past her, almost scaring her to death. She screamed. Howard came running. Mrs. Farley was coming down the stairs. Don't let anyone ever tell you we've mastered the intricacies of the human mind. Jessie hadn't seen her since she was a child, but she walked up to her and said, 'I'm home, Mother.' A shock like that can drop a healthy forty-year-old, let alone a woman who's lived with a guilty conscience for more than fifty years.

"I suppose that when her mother hit the floor, Marcie

knew that Jessie had to be her long-lost sister. Howard figured he couldn't handle everything at one time and the thing to do was get Mrs. Farley buried first. Afterward, they sat over there wondering what to do about Jessie."

"What will happen now?"

Corcoran and Miss Eliot were crossing the street toward them.

"You and I are going to learn that at the same time."

"All over," said Miss Eliot. "She was released from the institution so that she could live in a home. She now has her own. I'll arrange for everything she needs and stop by once a week to see how she's doing." She smiled. "And don't be surprised at all the Mercedes you'll see. The doctors will be studying this one for years."

"No repercussions for not reporting how Mrs. Farley really died or for keeping Jessie hidden for a week?" asked Barney.

"Only a few official lectures," said Corcoran. "A heart attack at ninety-five could be brought on by a big phone bill, and while there might be a couple of laws they broke, no one wants to spend a week looking for them."

Miss Eliot extended her hand. "Thank you, Barney."

He nodded.

Corcoran waited until she was in the car.

"I walked through the back yard, Barney," he said softly. "I don't think she should ever know."

"Neither do I. Go chase real criminals, Corcoran."

As his broad back retreated, Edna's fingers dug into Barney's arm. "Just what did he mean by that?"

Barney hesitated, even though Edna could be very difficult to live with when she knew he was keeping something from her.

"Funny how things work out," he said slowly. "If Miss Eliot hadn't showed up with her theory that Jessie was looking for her home, I would have never thought John Henry was sniffing anything over there except rabbit scent, because even he can't pick up anything a week old. But suppose it *was* Jessie? That was what made me check the records, and if I hadn't, I think that Jessie would have disappeared permanently."

Edna's eyes went wide. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"Corcoran had the same thought. Instead of being free after thirty years, Marcie and Howard must have felt they had traded one burden for another, and they didn't intend to let the years pass this time. Mrs. Farley survived because they couldn't get rid of her without questions being asked,

but if Jessie disappeared, there could be none because no one knew she was there."

"Disappeared?" Edna whispered the word. "How?"

"Howard has handled the heavy garden work for Marcie for years the way I handle yours, and you've never asked for a flower bed deeper than eight inches, or at the most twelve. Howard has one, freshly dug, that is three feet deep. Tell me what they intended to plant."

Edna lifted a stubborn chin. "They were simply replacing the soil."

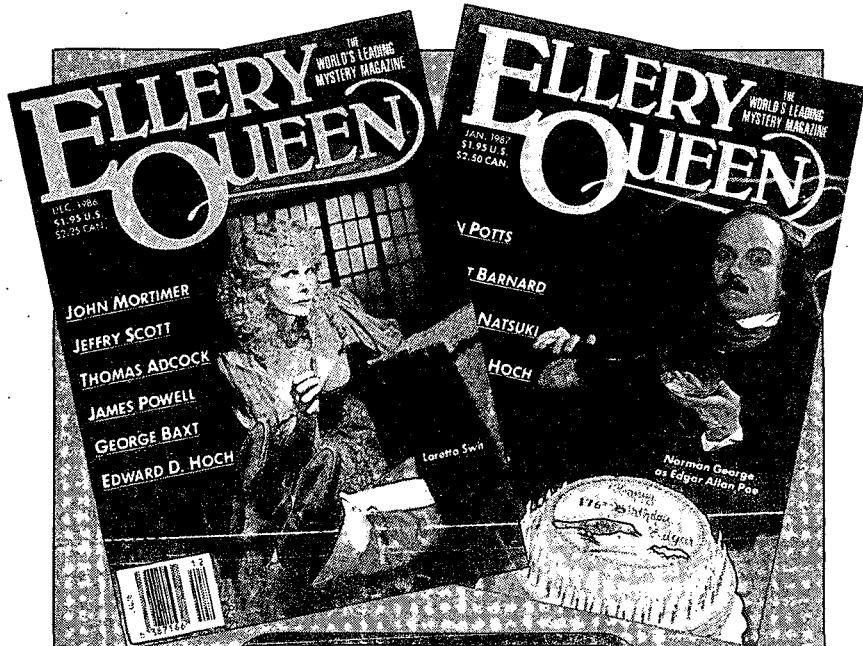
Sure they were, thought Barney. His warm-hearted see-no-evil wife wasn't there when he'd walked around the Farley back yard with Howard, listening to the words tumble out in that high-pitched voice and

feeling the man's hate for Mrs. Farley, knowing that nothing destroys reason and compassion more than hate and that Howard had lived with it for decades and Marcie all her life.

"Well, Jessie is safe now, so it doesn't matter," he said. "But John Henry did earn himself a nice piece of steak and Miss Eliot admired my clock so much I believe I'll give it to her. We'll buy something else for Denise."

Staring at the picture postcard-pretty house across the street where two bedroom windows gleamed like a pair of malevolent eyes in the reddish glow of the setting sun, Edna nodded once, which was her way of saying she knew he was right about the pit but she could never bring herself to admit it. Even to herself.

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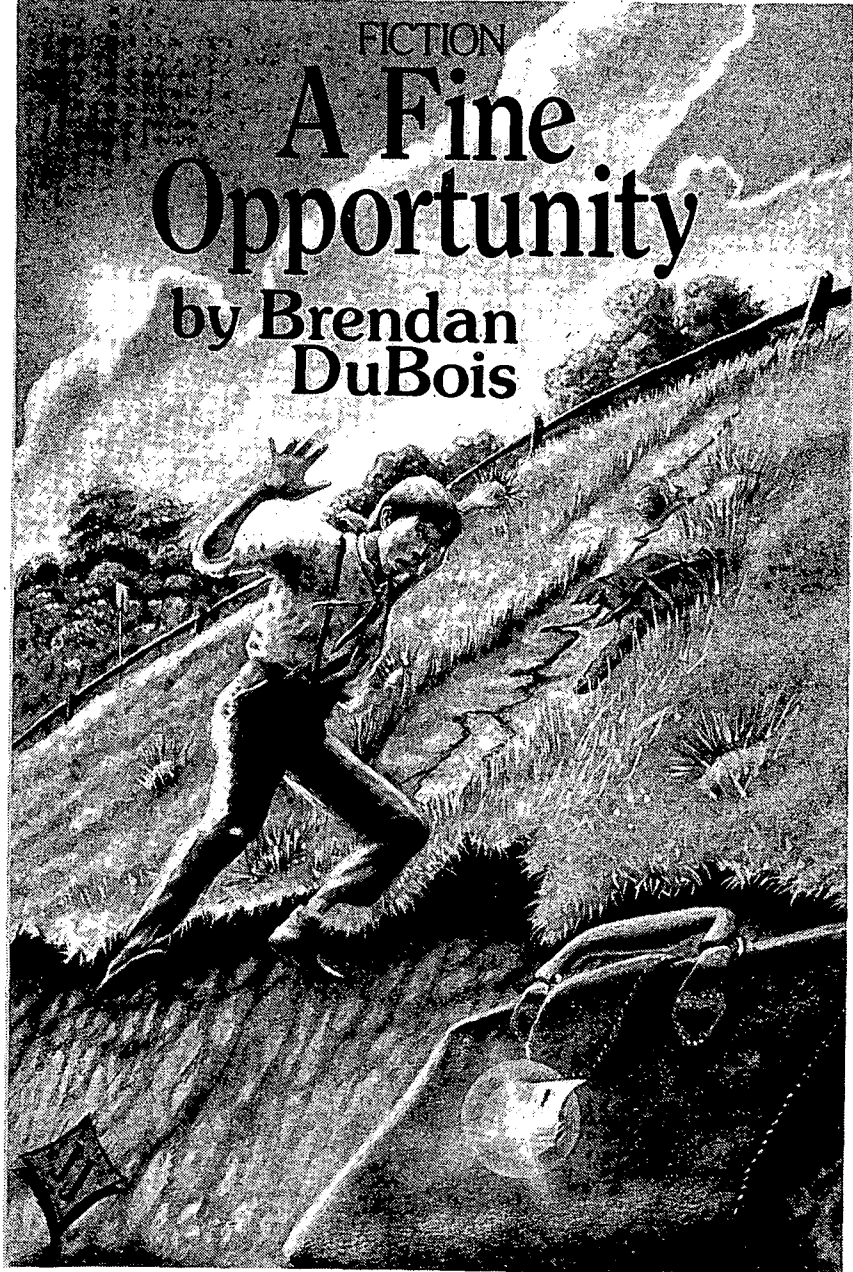


Illustration by Joe Jereda

It was snowing the night Ben Collins was complaining about his stupid son-in-law. Ben owned and operated Ben's Gulf in Drury, New Hampshire, and he stood by the plate glass window in the station's tiny office and glared out at the snow. There were two other men in the room, huddled around a woodstove in the corner. Gus Toomey reached out from his chair and grabbed a hunk of birch log, which he threw into the stove. The air was hot and steamy.

"So why is he so stupid, Ben?" Gus asked. He wore thick green wool pants and a heavy flannel shirt, and his boot-clad feet were stretched out to the stove. Drake Eldridge, who was on the other side of the stove, nodded and puffed at his pipe. Drake was the third oldest man in Drury.

"Maybe 'cause he's from Massachusetts," Drake said, his eyes twinkling, and Gus grinned at him. They were neighbors and had been friends for a couple of years, ever since Gus had moved to Drury after retiring.

"No, no, that's not it," Ben said, still looking out the window. Snow was falling in heavy sheets of white and his three gas pumps were covered by at least two inches of the stuff. An hour had passed since his last customer.

"The thing is," Ben continued, his hands in his greasy dungarees work coat, "that the dumb bunny's got an opportunity to make some big bucks by moving out to Manchester. Some new computer firm just pulled in and they wanted to hire him out. He told 'em no, the jerk." He snorted in disgust.

Gus thought of throwing in another piece of wood but he decided not to. The place was hot and cozy enough as it was, with the snow and the wind howling outside just a few feet away. There was a faded *Playboy* calendar on one cement wall, plus a couple of advertisements for oil filters and spark-plugs. About the only furniture was a battered metal desk that had Ben's cash register on it and three old easy chairs, their stuffing torn out and hanging like lengths of hemp. The chairs were set around the woodstove.

"So why didn't he go?" Gus asked.

Ben turned away from the window to face them. His name was stitched in fraying red thread over his chest. His face was thick and fleshy and stained with grease.

"The pup said he likes it around here, likes the easy living, the country life. Said he doesn't want to give that up to live in Manchester, live in a big city, fight traffic every morn-

ing. So I asked him how much more they were going to pay him, and he told me, and I told the numbnuts that for that much extra money, I'd move to Moscow. But the twerp just smiled and changed the subject. God, talk about having opportunity knock and letting it get away from you."

Gus saw his neighbor Drake tremble for a bit, and then calmly relight his pipe.

Gus turned towards him and said, "Did you say something, Drake?"

Drake looked up, surprise on his face, like he had been caught at something. He wore a black wool cap on his head and green chino workpants and shirt. From one shirt pocket a leather eyeglass case and some pens poked out. Even though it was December his wrinkled skin was still dark brown, like he had received a heavy tan he would never lose.

Drake smiled, puffed on his pipe. "Just remembering something that happened to me, an opportunity that I let get away, I suppose you could say."

The man tried to keep his voice light but there was something behind his eyes that made Gus feel uneasy. He had come to like Drake in the few years that he had known him, and he was going to drop the whole thing, except Ben sat on the

edge of his desk and said, "Tell us about it, Drake."

Gus kept his eyes on his neighbor. Four years ago Gus had moved here from Maine, after retiring early from a job where he sold other people's products to other companies. For once he wanted to do something for himself and he had moved to Drury, not because of its size or location, but because it was near a lake that offered good fishing. He lived alone and planned on fishing until he died, but in a few short months he had gotten bored. The days seemed as long as weeks. And then he met Drake. He didn't want hurt to come to the man.

"You don't have to, now," Gus offered, but Ben waved a hand at him.

"Go ahead, Drake," Ben said, hitching up his workpants.

Gus remembered the day Drake came over to his house, his hand out, saying, hello, neighbor, can you help me out with my car. He had taken Drake to Ben's gas station and after a while he began joining those two as they looked out the window and observed the traffic and tourists, talking politics, women, and the weather. It made the days go by so much better, so much easier, and he listened as the wind picked up and beat against the dirty plate glass. Selfishly he realized he

now wanted Drake to tell the story because it would keep him in this warm room for a few more minutes.

Drake said, "All right, then, so long as I don't bore you."

Best as I can recall it was around 1930, when I was a lad of fifteen or so. It was a warm day in October, Indian summer, and I was walking out on what's called Route 114, though back then we just knew it as the state road. Not any four-lane highways in those days. I wasn't much popular with the other young'uns at the time. I was too skinny and had asthma, and I remember one young bully, Walter Roux, who was after me all the time. Walter was only a year older than me but something strange must've happened in his body, 'cause he was a good inch over six feet and shaved every day. Funny thing. As you get older it gets harder to 'member the names of your friends and the first girl you ever kissed, but till I'm about a minute away from dying, I'll always remember Walter Roux and what he looked like. A thick boy, with heavy eyebrows and a mean grin.

On that day I was avoidin' going home, 'cause Walter and his friends had beaten me up some near the town common

and I tore my school pants in my knees. Now, that was a major disaster at my house. My mother—God rest her soul—was doing her best to raise me and my sister Ruth, she's living in North Adams with some doctor fella now. My mother was working ten or twelve hours a day at Drury Shoe, where those malls are now. My dad was a Marine officer in the First World War and got gassed pretty bad in one of them battles, and he coughed out his lungs for a couple of years before dyin' when I was five.

Out on the state road I was just pokin' along, looking for stuff that people would throw out of their cars. I remember back then bein' able to tell an Oldsmobile and a Packard and a Ford all apart, and I wished for the day when my mom could afford to have a car, and that was when we didn't even have enough money for a radio. Imagine, now, how bad that must've been for a boy my age, when all the kids in school are talkin' about the radio shows and serials, and you get left out 'cause you don't know what's going on. It was rough, 'specially as I was a boy who liked to read a lot, and they thought I was queer for all that.

So I found a couple of unbroken bottles and a cigar stub, but nothing else, and I remember

I was whistling, feelin' kinda happy, tryin' to forget that I would have to go home and listen to my mom yell at me for scraping my pants, even though it hadn't been my fault. It was warm and my corduroy jacket was over my shoulder, and down in a ditch near Tracy's Creek, I saw a flicker of light, where the sun was shining on something. So I was curious and such and I looked over, and all I saw was a black thing, nestled in the grass, and somethin' shiny staring up at me. Well, that got my curiosity up even more, and I tried to get down to the ditch. It was pretty deep, and some water from the creek was runnin' off in it.

I got on my stomach and started backin' down, and wouldn't you know I slipped when some grass started cutting my hand. I tumbled some and flipped over and landed right in the bottom of the ditch, all wet and muddy and scratched up, and I'm not embarrassed to say that I was cryin' some. I mean, bad enough that I had ripped my pants, but now I had ripped my shirt as well, and had gotten mud over everything. By then I was ready to throw it in but I remembered the black thing and crawled over, and there it was. It was a doctor's case, it looked like, a black satchel, and the glimmering

thing was the sunlight shining off the lock. I drug the satchel up and I remember thinking, it must be a doctor's case that fell out of a car, and if I can give it back to him, I'll get a reward or something. So I opened the case, even though the lock was tough and I snapped a fingernail, 'cause I was looking for a man's name or address inside.

But by then I felt like I was floating, 'cause there weren't no doctor's tools or clothes or anybody's name inside the bag, but inside there was more money than I never knew existed, banded together with rubber bands, all crisp and new and smelling wonderful. Twenties and fifties and hundreds. Piles of 'em.

Ben was leaning over from the desk, his tongue poking out to touch his lips. "Money? The bag was full of money?"

Drake drew on his pipe. "Yep. Tens of thousands of dollars, I'm sure. All sittin' there, in the lap of a poor fifteen-year-old New Hampshire boy. All that money."

Gus took a poker to the woodstove, stirring up the embers, looking closely at his friend Drake. The man was smiling with the telling of the story, but there was something about the eyes. Ben slapped his hands on

the desk and leaned back.

"Hoo, boy, all that money. Drake, what did you do with it, huh? What did you spend it on?"

Drake just smiled over at Ben. Outside the snow was still coming down and there was a low rumble as a state plow churned by, spewing up a stream of snow. Its amber strobe cast orange slabs of light across the landscape. Gus thought for a moment before speaking.

"You didn't do anything, did you?" Gus said. "After all, you said this was a story about an opportunity you let slip by. Did you leave it there, Drake?"

Drake nodded. "That I did, Gus, that I did."

"I don't believe it!" Ben said, his voice a shriek. "All that money and you *left* it there, left it to get rained on and picked on by the birds? Why in hell did you do that?"

"I had my reasons," Drake calmly said. He looked over at Gus. "Do you have any idea why?"

Gus looked at them both, Ben, on his desk, his stubby legs touching the floor, shaking his head in bewilderment, and at Drake, one lean leg crossing over another, the end of his pipe gently tapping at his yellow teeth. The room was warm and the state plow rumbled back again, making the plate glass

window quiver in its frame and a row of dry gas containers on a shelf tremble. Both men were looking at him, Ben with a look of dismay on his face, Drake with a look of . . . contentment, maybe? The wind howled, thrusting snowflakes against the window.

"I think," Gus said, speaking slowly, "I think that you might have been afraid that whoever lost that money would come back to look for it."

Drake winked at him. "Exactly."

Think of this, now, here's a boy about fifteen, sittin' in a ditch with muddy water lapping around his ankles, with all this money in his lap. But he's not seeing the money. No sir. He's seeing a radio and a house for his mom, new clothes, a bicycle, even a motor car. All of this is in his lap, and all it would take is for him to climb out of the ditch and run home, and he knew that even Mom wouldn't yell at him for being a mess like that.

But this boy didn't, no sir. I just sat there, touching the money, not believin' it was real, and after the excitement had died down some I started thinking. I started thinking real hard. I told you I read a lot for my age, and I tried to think it through.

First of all, I remember comin' to the notion that this wasn't honest money, not by a long shot. Drury was and still is a poor town, and I knew no one had that kind of money to pile in a satchel. Remember now, this was a year after the Great Crash. So that left it up to either bootleggers travelin' back and forth from Canada, or some of those bank robbers from out in the Midwest, comin' through maybe to hide out. Maybe the satchel fell out, maybe it was thrown out in some argument or such, but anyway it was there. And right then I remember shuddering, Gus and Ben, I remember shuddering, thinking what might happen if they came back looking for it, just as I was sitting there.

So why not take it home? Well, I thought about that, too. After all, if it were bank robbers, maybe they didn't know where on the state road it fell out of their car. But I knew if I took it home, I wouldn't be able to just hide it and forget about it, no, it would eat at me, every day, like a cancer. And of course I couldn't start buyin' things. My mom knew how much money we all had, and if I came home with a radio, she'd probably whup me until I told her where the money came from.

All right, then, if I did bring it home, then I'd have to tell

Mom, and my sis Ruth, too, and by then of course, people the way they are, by next week the whole town would know. Even if the three of us could keep a secret, I knew my mom would start spendin' that money, and the way Drury was, everybody knew how bad off we was, and if we suddenly came up with a new radio and an automobile, tongues would start wagging.

So that scared me, too. Suppose I took it home and we did start spendin' it, and the tongues wagged and the stories started, and the people who lost the money heard those stories. What would happen? Well, most likely they'd come to get it back, madder'n hell that we found it, and even madder 'cause we spent some of it. And I didn't want that happenin' either.

Well, that day ended with the sun going down behind the White Mountains, with me in the ditch, touching the money and cryin', knowing deep inside that what I was doing was right, but that didn't take care of those dreams about a bicycle and a motorcar. When it got dark I closed the bag up again and dropped it back in the ditch, and scuffled home. Of course I got a bad whippin' from my mom when I got there. Not only was I late for supper, but my clothes were ruined, and for a month I had to go to bed early.

I was none too pleased for a fifteen-year-old.

It was quiet in the gas station office, with even the wind having died down. Drake drew softly on his pipe, the blue smoke curling away from his lips.

"There's my story, Ben," he said, "so don't be too harsh on your son-in-law for ignoring his opportunity. Everybody's got their reasons."

The story might have been over, but Gus wasn't sure. There was something about Drake's voice that questioned at him. Ben must have seen the same thing because he spoke up.

"You just left it there, right?" Ben asked.

Drake nodded.

"All of it?" Ben persisted. "Okay, I can believe your story, Drake, but all of it? Weren't you tempted to slip off a fifty here, a hundred there from the bundles? Weren't you? If they did come back and find it, how would they have known that some was missing?"

Drake grinned widely. "Got me there, Ben, yes you did. After I got out of the ditch and started headin' home, that thought did occur to me, and I figured that whoever the bag belonged to owed me a pair of pants, at least. So I went back over and it was too dark to see

much, so I slipped off a handful of bills and went home. It was close to three hundred dollars, I remember. Not much now but I managed to help things out a lot back then, when a dollar went a hell of a lot further. It helped pay for a lot of Saturday movies, and every now and then I slipped a few bills into my mom's purse."

Ben was now smiling. "Knew it, I knew it. Drake, you didn't pass an opportunity, you just worked it a bit differently. That's all. You didn't miss it."

Drake looked over at Gus. "Maybe so, maybe I did work it differently. But it's getting late and my joints are aching up a fuss. Will you take me home, Gus?"

Gus got up and got dressed, helping Drake with his winter coat. After a few "good nights" with Ben, he walked slowly out into the small parking lot, Drake holding onto his arm and leaning into him. The snow had stopped but a stiff breeze was blowing down from the mountains, and Gus got Drake into the front seat of his pickup truck. After starting the engine and the heater, Gus went back out with a snow scraper, clearing off the windshield, headlights and taillights, all the while thinking of Drake's story. Even though the night air was frigid he felt warm. He felt that

something was out of place.

There was a honk as Ben drove out in his tow truck, heading home to his wife and five kids, and Gus lifted a hand in salute. The gas station's lights were off and there was no traffic on the road. The engine to his pickup truck was murmuring at a steady pace and exhaust floated out in a thick gray curl. Gus thought some more and it came to him as he got back into the truck.

Drake's pipe was out but it was still clenched firmly in his teeth. "Cold enough out there, ain't it."

"Yep." Gus reached out to release the parking brake, and stopped. "Drake?"

"Hmm?"

"Drake, what happened to the money?"

Drake scratched at his jaw. "Told you already. I left it there."

"I know you did, but something had to happen. You must've gone back to see if somebody had picked it up, or if another kid had found it. What happened?"

Drake gave him a cool glance, his face looking yellowish from the dashboard lights. "You're a bright one, Gus."

"No, not bright. Just years of being a salesman, reading other people's faces. I read in your face that there was a little more to that story."

"Yep," Drake agreed. "A little bit more. Well, a few days after I left some other boy found the satchel, lying there just where I left it. And you want to know the sad thing, you know the sad thing about who found it?"

He knew. "Walter Roux."

"That's right. Walter Roux. That tree trunk that masqueraded as a boy, that boy who beat me up so much, he was the one that found it. Some justice, huh? He found it, and just like I thought, he spent the money left and right, even bought his dad a new Ford. A couple of papers ran stories about that punk, you know, rich kid buys poor dad a new car, that sort of thing. A hell of a story."

"Yeah. A hell of a story." Gus released the brake and drove the truck out to the road. Even with the plows the snow was thick and he kept it slow.

"You can go on," Gus said, keeping his eyes on the road. "Did you tell Walter Roux where that satchel was?"

Drake gave a short, dry laugh. "Maybe just a hint, when he was in the middle of pounding my face. That I had heard from another kid that yet another kid had found a doctor's bag out there, but had to leave it 'cause it was deep in the ditch and he couldn't reach it. But Walter Roux got it all right."

"What happened after that?" Snowflakes dipped and whirled in the truck's headlights.

"Another story, a sadder one. A couple of weeks after those newspaper articles appeared, somebody stole that new Ford and ransacked the house, stealing back the money. Too much publicity, I guess."

He knew what was next. His mouth was dry. "And Walter?"

"Walter?" There was a sharp pop as Drake relit his pipe with a wooden match. "Poor Walter died a few weeks later. Got himself shot. State cops said it was a hunting accident, but I never heard of no hunter who'd pump two pistol rounds in the back of somebody's head, mistaking that person for a whitetail, even if they was out in the middle of the woods."

Gus drove on, not thinking of anything, just trying to keep the truck steady in the snow. The heater didn't seem to be working right. Drake spoke up.

"You want to know what I thought back then?"

Gus cleared his throat. "Yes, I do."

"I thought, well, here's to a life in Drury without gettin' beat up by Walter Roux. And you want to know what I think now?"

Gus nodded, wondering why he didn't feel angry or scared.

Drake settled back in his seat, puffing with contentment on his pipe, the ember making his face look red. "I think now, and maybe I should tell Ben, that a fine opportunity can be a hell of a thing, if you work it right."

The Belson Sisters— Didn't They Die?



by
Layne
Littlepage

Illustration by Karen Stolper

That's what older people used to ask me when I told them I was renting a room in Elfie Belson's apartment. People who remember the Belson Sisters are at least sixty years old because the Belson Sisters were a singing duo back in the days when they had what they used to call "cafe society," and even before then.

Elphina and Delphina Belson. Elf and Delf, as they used to call themselves, according to Elfie. Their portrait is still here in the apartment, even though Elfie's nephew wanted to take it away. It hangs in the living room; an oil painting of Elfie and Delfie in their prime, with their blonde hair in marcelled waves, wearing matching white satin evening gowns and looking like they're going to burst out singing the hit parade of 1934.

The apartment is spooky as hell sometimes, especially late at night. Then the dolls Elfie and Delfie collected that are hanging on the wall between Delfie's old bedroom (where I sleep) and Delfie's old bathroom—the hallway you sometimes have to walk along in the middle of the night—all those old, dusty dolls with wide-open eyes and heads hanging at funny angles seem to watch you in the dark as you hurry past them.

Even Enrico (he's my dra-

matic coach) told me the place had bad vibrations when he came here to coach me on *La Traviata* last week. Enrico's original name was Henry. He changed it, the way everyone does in opera, and you might think Enrico himself is a little spooky in his three-quarter-length cape and all the gold chains and rings and the ascot, but Enrico is actually fairly normal. I mean, he has a wife and children in spite of it all, but considering Elfie's nephew, having a wife and children doesn't always make you normal, as you're going to find out.

Anyway, Enrico said the apartment had bad vibrations. He also pointed out that Elfie's old bedroom, with the bed with the gilded headboard and the chaise longue and the skirted dressing table and the little desk, looks exactly like the set of Act IV of *La Traviata*—the room where Violetta dies—and I have to admit Enrico is right.

The problem is—I can't move out. Until the estate gets settled, I can go on living here for a hundred and seventy-five dollars a month. Try finding that anywhere else in New York City. And with what you have to spend to have an operatic career in New York, with lessons and vocal coachings and dramatic coachings and accompanist fees, one seventy-five a

month is about all you can afford for rent. That's why I moved here in the first place, back when Elfie was alive.

My friend Rahnee, the psychic, says it's my karma to take care of old people. It happened before with my voice teacher, Madame Stettler, who could remember every detail about auditioning for the Berliner Hoffoper in 1929, but couldn't remember what you told her ten seconds before, and then again with Mr. Koussellovsky's wife, who became a vegetable from Alzheimer's. I ended up being around old ladies who kept forgetting things, and that was how it was with Elfie.

Elfie's name suited her perfectly. She was tiny and thin, and walked around like a person-sized wind-up toy because her hip had been broken and reset several years earlier. Elfie didn't talk like someone you'd meet today. She said things like "twenty-three skid-doo," and "You bet your bottom, sweet patootie," and she'd say them over and over, the way she'd repeat those jokes everyone has heard a million times. For instance, when I was at the piano doing my scales, she'd totter by and say, "Practice, practice," which is the punch line for that joke about how you get to Carnegie Hall. But when she was talking about the past,

which she always did, what she said most often was, "Those were the good old days."

Elfie had been living alone since Delfie died, and she was really glad to have me there. I had to take care of her quite a bit, but I didn't mind. Not at first. It was later that it got so bad. But for your own room and bath in a huge apartment plus the use of a concert grand piano—all for one seventy-five a month—you'll put up with a lot.

In the last year she was alive, the year I lived with her, Elfie got progressively worse mentally. She started depending on me to do just about everything for her, and then she'd start crying when I'd leave the apartment. And obviously, I had to go out—to go to auditions, to work for Mr. Koussellovsky, and to just plain get out of that apartment and away from Elfie and around people who weren't old and weren't crying.

That's why it was a relief when Elfie's nephew, George, called up and said he was taking her to Framingham for the holidays. I'd talked to George on the phone a couple of times, and he'd been by to visit Elfie, but not when I was there. I'd heard about him from Mr. Koussellovsky's friend Helga (Helga is the one who got me started renting Delfie's old

room). Helga told me "the nephew" lived in Framingham, Massachusetts, with a woman who had twelve foster children. She also told me George had a male lover in New York that he commuted to see at least once a month. Another thing I knew about him was that he published pamphlets about reincarnation and macrobiotic food.

So when George called and said he was going to take Elfie to Framingham for the holidays, I was very relieved. No more crying, no more having to give Elfie a bath, no more Elfie—not for over a month.

I came home the evening of the day George was supposed to pick up Elfie, and sure enough, he'd picked her up. She was gone. So were the color television set, the two Oriental rugs, all the jade lamps in the shapes of Buddhas, Elfie's three fur coats (brown mink, blonde mink, and ermine), and the diamond ring that she never wore but just kept in her dresser drawer.

I called Mr. Peters (the lawyer I paid my one seventy-five rent to), who handled all Elfie's bills and legal affairs. Mr. Peters is a little old guy about half my size who's been nice to me. I told him about the extras that went up to Framingham along with Elfie. He called George, and according to Mr. Peters, George told him that he took

the TV set to fix it, the Oriental rugs for cleaning, the jade lamps because the cords were getting frayed and dangerous, the fur coats so Elfie would be warm in Framingham, and the ring because Elfie never liked to travel without her jewelry. George promised to return everything.

I told my friend Rahnee, the psychic, about George's taking Elfie and the various items to Framingham, and she said, "It doesn't sound like she's coming back." And Rahnee was right.

When I got back from visiting my parents in Wisconsin over the holidays, Mr. Peters, the lawyer, called and told me Elfie had died peacefully in her sleep on New Year's Eve. This report came from George, who had her cremated in Framingham because he said Elfie had always told him she didn't want to be buried in the ground.

I felt terrible. I remembered Elfie repeating her slang expressions from the 1920's while she tottered around on her brittle little legs. I remembered how she'd loved to hear me sing, even my high notes, which no one else in the building really appreciated. I thought about all the times she'd talked about herself and Delfie, and how each time she'd say, "Elfie and Delfie for your dining pleasure." And how when I'd sing one of the old sheet music

songs on the piano that she and Delfie used to sing, tears would come into her big blue eyes and run down her papery pink cheeks.

And I felt guilty. I'd been relieved as hell when George took Elfie away because she was driving me crazy. I wondered if she'd started to drive George and his wife and the twelve foster children crazy, too. Then I thought about how, with all the things Elfie had told me over the last year, and she'd told me a lot—about sailing around the world and nearly marrying a baron, and about the time she was almost raped—she never told me she didn't want to be buried in the ground.

I called Mr. Peters back and I asked him what does "died quietly in her sleep" mean? And how would anybody know what happened to Elfie if she was cremated in Framingham?

Mr. Peters said there was nothing that could be done now, and it was probably a blessing she'd died peacefully because she'd lived a long life and she hadn't been in the mental or physical condition to enjoy her golden years.

Then I said, "Mr. Peters, just between you and me, who are Elfie's heirs?"

Mr. Peters told me that back when Delfie was alive and Elfie didn't forget so many things, it

had been set up so George would inherit half the estate, and the other half would go to a second cousin who lived in Hong Kong. Then Mr. Peters asked me to call him if George returned the things he took to "fix."

The next day I was home for the afternoon, getting ready to go to an audition. I was in Delfie's old bathroom with the door closed, running the hot water in the shower and breathing the steam. I have to do that before I sing in the winter because the radiators in New York apartments are hell on your vocal cords. When I couldn't see the walls any more, I opened the door and heard what sounded like the telephone cutting off in mid-ring. I was dressed and over in Elfie's old bathroom (which wasn't steamed up) putting on my makeup when I heard the noises in the apartment.

I peeked out of the bathroom door, and there in the living room was a big, hulking guy whom I'd never seen before looking at the concert grand. I figured right away that it was George, since he and Mr. Peters and the super were the only people besides me who had keys to the apartment. I came out of the bathroom.

"Who are you?" I asked, even though I was pretty sure I already knew.

He gave a start and turned around. He looked like he'd thought the coast was clear until he heard me.

"I'm George Belson," he said. "Elfie's nephew. We've spoken on the phone."

Then George and I had a conversation. He told me there were just a few sentimental items he wanted from the apartment that would mean a lot to him but wouldn't have any value to anyone else (meaning the second cousin in Hong Kong). For instance, the wastebasket in Delfie's room that had been painted every time her room had been painted and now was pale green to match the room, and the front doormat with the letters "E" and "D" interwoven on it, and the portrait of Elfie and Delfie, and the concert grand, which George said Elf and Delf had wanted him to have.

I didn't bring up the television set or the Oriental rugs or the jade lamps or the fur coats or the ring. I just listened. George told me he'd been here the day Delfie died of a heart attack. He said Delfie was a wonderful person who had waited on Elfie hand and foot and that Elfie had just worn Delf out so that Delf had died before her time.

I had to warm up for my audition, so I told George to feel

free to look around, but I had to do ten minutes of scales.

I was watching him out of the corner of my eye from the piano while I was singing my scales and he was in the living room. He picked up a porcelain bowl and checked out what it said on the bottom. Then he went around to the dining room and I heard him opening drawers and making noise, but I couldn't see him any more. I finished singing and grabbed my music and went into Delfie's old bedroom to get my bag. George was there, bent over the desk, and he jumped again.

"Just looking at Delf's wastebasket," he said. "It's going to mean a lot to me."

I got out of there fast and went to the audition. I sang pretty well—"*Sempre libera*" (Ever free) from *La Traviata*—but I had audition nerves and I didn't take the interpolated high E flat at the end. I just went up to the high B flat and held it for as long as I could. With audition nerves you want to play it a little safe, and my high E flat sometimes isn't my best note.

When I was coming down from the adrenaline after the audition, I started thinking about Delfie's wastebasket, and about how I was almost positive George had murdered Elfie. And about how there wasn't one

thing I could do to prove it.

I think of myself as a fairly patient person. I can put up with a lot, until that one extra thing comes along and pushes me right over the edge. Like the incident with the wastebasket making me mad when it wasn't really the wastebasket. What was *really* making me mad was that if George had killed Elfie, he was never going to be punished for it.

I wasn't absolutely sure. If he hadn't, what I was going to do wouldn't bother him. But if he had, especially if he believed what he published, it would.

It was one of George's pamphlets that I found in Elfie's bedroom that gave me the inspiration. "Beyond the Grave, or You Will Live Again," it was titled.

I looked for a sample of Elfie's handwriting, but I couldn't find one anywhere in the apartment, probably because Mr. Peters' office had been paying all the bills since Delfie died. What I found was part of an old letter that Delfie had started writing but hadn't sent, written on the top sheet of a stack of stationery from an ocean liner that must have gone out of commission years ago.

Kind of copying Delfie's style, but making more of a scribble with a scratchy fountain pen, I found George's pamphlet, and

right below "Beyond the Grave, or You Will Live Again," I wrote, "Why didn't you bury me?" I have to admit, it gave me some goosebumps. I put the pamphlet in a plain envelope and mailed it back to its address in Framingham.

A few days went by, and I gave Mr. Peters a call. I asked him if he'd heard anything more from George, and he said no. He asked me if George had returned Elfie's things, and I said no. That wasn't enough for me.

I wanted to make George lose a few nights' sleep, so after I hung up, I went into Delfie's old bedroom and got out the ocean liner stationery. I stared at the paper, trying to imagine Elfie and Delfie singing and sailing around the world on the ship shown in a drawing the size of a dime on the top corner. Then on a clean sheet, I wrote, "You thought you burned me, but when the *Berengaria* docks again, I'm coming ashore." It scared the hell out of *me*, just writing it.

After I mailed that one, I got my brainstorm. Sheet music!

I went to the piano and looked at the songs on the stand: "If You Were the Only Girl in the World," "Love in Bloom," "Wake Up and Dream," "What a Swell Party This Is," and "The Last Time I Saw Paris." None of them seemed right. I dug around

in the storage space inside the piano bench and I found two that looked likely.

I decided to send George "I'll See You Again" first. I put it in a big brown envelope and mailed it up to Framingham. Two days later, I sent him "Someday I'll Find You."

I imagined George having nightmares and maybe losing some weight, but I also realized there would come a point when I'd run out of sheet music with appropriate song titles. I thought I might hold off for a while and just send one every so often. Then again, maybe no one had heard word one from George because Elfie really *had* just died quietly in her sleep after all.

Doing my scales several afternoons after that, and stopping for a second or two to loosen my jaw, I heard a very quiet sound coming from the kitchen. I stood completely still by the piano, listening. I hadn't realized how dark the apartment was, even in the middle of the afternoon. And how big it was. I felt completely alone in it, except for whatever was out in the kitchen. Then I remembered how my friend Rahnee had said, "That apartment is bad luck for you."

There is no question in my mind that Rahnee is genuinely psychic because who should

come around the corner of the dining room right then but George. You know how sometimes you can see exactly what the other person has in mind just by looking into their eyes? I saw it with George. I'd forgotten how huge the guy was. I'm positive he ate more than macrobiotic food. He was down at the end of the concert grand, and he had his left hand on the piano like he was going to sneak around it and get me by surprise, except that I could see him sneaking. I couldn't see his right hand, and his eyes looked like a big animal's when a big animal is coming after a little animal.

"You've been sending me mail," he said.

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"Disembodied entities," he said, "don't use the postal service."

Then George lifted his right hand like he purposely wanted to show me he had a carving knife from the kitchen.

I took a breath and gave my loudest, most ear-piercing scream, and that seemed to stop him for a second. Anyway, he flinched. Then he smiled.

"The neighbors will think you're singing," he said.

Well, that capped it. It's always that one last thing that sets me off. Killing Elfie, com-

ing after me with the carving knife—those things were bad, and I have to admit they had me scared. But no one, I mean *no* one tells me my singing sounds like screaming.

I knocked over the mahogany brace propping open the top of the concert grand and the lid slammed down on George's hand. There was a crash and a sort of cracking sound right before George started to scream, and I hopped up on the lid the way I used hop onto the double bars back in high school in Wisconsin and sat down on top of the piano. Fortunately, I couldn't hear any more cracking or crunching sounds over the noise George was making or I might have started to feel sick. It was also fortunate he was seven feet away from me, with the piano lid—which had to weigh a good fifty pounds—plus my one hundred and thirty pounds, holding him down by his left hand. I noticed he'd dropped the knife and was trying to lift the piano lid with his right hand, but it didn't look as if he was going to be able to budge it.

I wasn't sure what to do next, so I sat there and waited for George to quiet down. Then when he was lying against the piano, groaning and looking like he was going to pass out, I started to feel a little sorry for him. I even thought about let-

ting him up. I just wasn't sure how much of it might be an act. And if I jumped off the piano and ran for the door, there was always the chance he might grab the knife and come after me again.

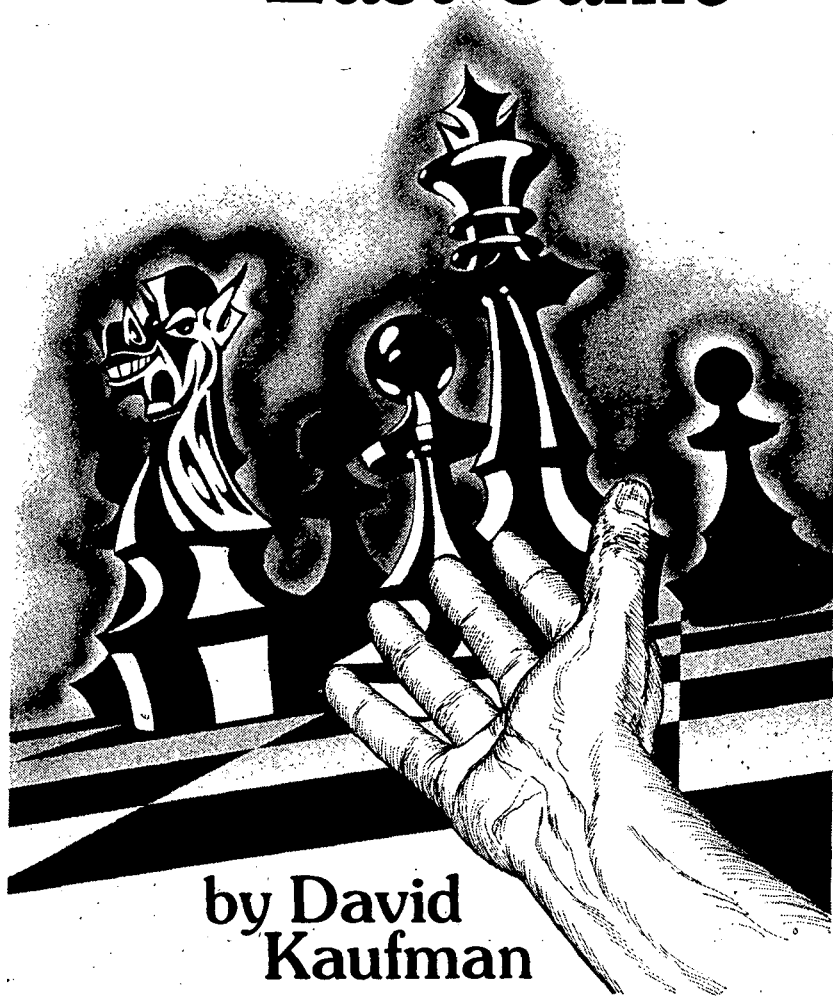
So I stayed put.

I looked past the end of the piano where George was huddled, across to the portrait on the opposite wall. There were Elfie and Delfie, side by side in their glossy satin gowns, the way they used to be and the way you had to hope they were again. The sweet expression on Elfie's face reminded me that she was honestly the only person in the building who appreciated my singing of the end of "*Sempre libera*" from *La Traviata*. And how one time when I was feeling miserable because some of the neighbors had complained to the super and he came by to tell me to stop singing, Elfie had said, "Practice, practice, sweet patootie. That's how you get to Carnegie Hall."

So I started to sing it. I took the run up to the repeated high C's followed by the fast run and the last notes of the aria, and instead of just going for the high B flat at the end, I took the high E flat and held it—looking right into Elfie's young, beautiful, painted eyes. Then I sang the end of "*Sempre libera*" over and over until the super came.

FICTION

Mr. Hancock's Last Game



by David
Kaufman

Illustration by Jim Odbert

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It was Voltaire, I think, who contended that, as with all truly useless endeavors, there are men who would die for chess. Or Hugo. I have tried and cannot find such an implication in either man's work. No real matter, for it is true—men *have* died for chess. The historian can cite examples, and I myself know of one man who died for the game. For, or perhaps *because* of it.

It happened just before we moved away from Garlock's Bend. The fellow's name was Batchelder Hancock, an odd, odd, hairy little man with a pug nose, a small mustache, and a protruding belly. He was a quite close friend of my father. They often played together in the sunroom with the wicker chairs and the fish tanks when I was a child.

We lived then in the Trostle house on the high edge of the valley, and the long, marvelous sunporch of that house overlooked the lake and the whole of Garlock's Bend. In miniature so far below us, it was a pretty sight indeed. The wonderful memories I have of that house and that view and that sunporch! After all this time they are still precious to me. They help me in some measure to forget the awesome loathing I feel to this day when I think of Mr. Hancock.

At once it both thrilled and frightened me, sitting quietly to the left of my father—my designated spot—to watch the two men wait for what seemed to me hours between moves.

Each had an entirely different approach to the game. My father was a man of many interests. Chess was no more to him than one of many hobbies, and he could play or not with no bother. But Mr. Hancock was a quite different man, a man who seemed almost literally to live for chess. He constantly carried the pocket set and the texts which so quickly mark the real addict. He recited to my father the results of Berlin, Hastings—all the famous tournaments, could play the great games by heart, and my father had said that he knew as much chess lore as any living man.

It is true, however, that not all chess addicts are fine players. When Mr. Hancock played with my father, at least, he won few games, for my father was a player of excellent strength, but the odd little man played with a zeal that even I as a youngster realized was quite remarkable. It was possible even for me, little though I then knew, to tell the course a particular game was taking—just by watching the color of his face: white losing, red winning.

The redder his face became, the closer he was to victory. As the end approached of a game he was winning, he would shout, clippingly, "Check. Check! Check! CHECK AND MATE, SIR!" in a louder and louder voice. A terrible, snarling demon to one my age. At the finish of one of these infrequent wins he would expel much pent-up air, his face all the while cooling to normal coloring, his features appearing much relieved. He would then giggle gleefully. My father would smile patiently and tell me to stop banging my shoes on the rung of my chair.

As I have noted, Mr. Hancock's wins were few in number, for my father was a very strong player. The vehemence of his outbursts as he approached one of these wins made the little man seem all the more frightening to me. His shouting sent shudders up and down my back, and I can even yet see his wild-eyed stare as I huddled as close to my father as he would allow. Yet, with all the distastefulness of Mr. Hancock, I could not bring myself to leave the sunroom when he was there because I found him strangely fascinating.

I was very pleased that my father almost continually won against him. I knew only vaguely *what* he won, for I had

only the simplest notion of the principles of the game, but I remember that each time Mr. Hancock lost it made him very angry and upset. Because I did not like him, it pleased me to see him lose.

Things went on the same way for quite a period—my father victorious in all but a few games, these few seeming to make Mr. Hancock thirst for more wins. He would give almost anything, he said, almost anything to be able to win consistently. My father said something about not attaching too much importance to a game which was, after all, only a game, but Mr. Hancock seemed inordinately serious.

Then one day, after having been beaten by my father in at least twenty straight games, Mr. Hancock disappeared. We did not see him or hear a word from him for about three months. For the whole of that last summer. My father, a very tolerant and understanding man, and generally imperturbable, grew quite excited as the days of Mr. Hancock's disappearance increased in number. He checked the mailbox constantly for a letter from him, began to sit nervously at the bay window of our front room, and soon literally lived waiting for some word from the missing chess player. I did not under-

stand, of course, but he would not discuss the matter with anyone. He locked himself in the sunroom for hours at a time, reading one of the ugly-looking books that Mr. Hancock had lent him just before the disappearance. It was a very large book and it had a powdery black leather cover and yellowed pages. I had seen them sitting over those books, and although I was not allowed to be near and thus could not tell what they were talking about, I had heard them quarrel harshly over that one black book.

When Mrs. Berger, our housekeeper, saw fit to question my father about Mr. Hancock, of whom she seemed quite fond, he sent her from the room in a huff and a puff. He was very abrupt with her. She fretted for days, often muttering things to herself.

By inclination my father and I slept in the same room of that immense house—or rather I slept, for he tossed fitfully most nights after Mr. Hancock disappeared. His dreams must have been very troublesome, for he often moaned strange phrases in his sleep. I can yet remember some. "Eldritch mass..." he said several times, and "...loathsome walls..." and "...in the water..."

These phrases meant nothing to me, I confess, and I remem-

bered them only because of the upset state of my father and because several of them were new words for me, rather than for any meaning they might convey.

One day I opened the back door intending to play in the yard—and there he was, his fist raised, ready to knock. I jumped back, startled, then turned and ran for my father. "Daddy! Daddy! Daddy, he's back!" I shouted, glad to give my father the news he seemed so anxious to hear. I had expected him to be relieved at hearing of Mr. Hancock's return; he looked, however, completely shaken, looked as if he were going to faint. I had never seen him like that before, and I burst into tears. Remarkably, almost immediately he seemed to control and compose himself; he stopped my crying, took my hand; and we both went to the back door where I had left the fat and terrible Mr. Batchelder Hancock.

My father did not shake Mr. Hancock's extended hand, but said, "So you have come back." I huddled close to him. "You shou..."

"I did it!" Mr. Hancock shouted. "I did it! And I am ready for chess." He hurried off his heavy black overcoat, looked at my father, then down at me. "A game of chess, sir. If you please." He seemed quite excited.

"Some tea first," insisted my father, "and an explan . . ."

"First a game of chess," Mr. Hancock grunted firmly. "I will play chess." He would have it no other way.

My father shrugged as he directed me to bring out the board and pieces. Mr. Hancock almost seemed beside himself in anticipation. They sat at the board, and I took my customary place by their side. Mr. Hancock announced loudly, "I shall take the black pieces." My father protested that they should choose sides by chance, but Mr. Hancock was quite insistent on giving my father the advantage by taking the black pieces for himself.

Relenting, my father moved. He moved, but not carelessly as he had before. He moved with hesitation, with apprehension, staring at the hunched-over form opposite him.

Mr. Hancock moved.

My father moved again.

Mr. Hancock moved.

At Black's thirteenth move Mr. Hancock gave up a knight. At his seventeenth he lost a bishop. I knew enough about chess to realize that my father must be ahead. He had two of Mr. Hancock's pieces. But it was my father who now struggled at the board, who got red in the face and gesticulated. Mr. Hancock, smiling at me in

a very casual way, absently moved a pawn and said, "And how is school, little sir?"

I did not answer, but stared at my father who now sat stonily, his brow wet, his breath heavy. He moved after ten minutes of intense thought.

"Knight on bishop four to knight six, check," said Mr. Hancock quickly and confidently, moving the piece as he spoke. He made the move even before my father had taken his fingers from his moved piece.

Five long and painful minutes passed before my father moved his king out of check. "Check again," Mr. Hancock grunted, moving a pawn forward immediately. My father's king had one square. He moved. "Check!" announced the fat little man.

My father again found a square for his king.

"Check!" shouted Mr. Hancock, slamming down a rook.

My father lasted three more checks before he was mated in the middle of the board. It was an ignominious experience for a player of his strength. Mr. Hancock was indecent enough to laugh loudly at my father, who insisted upon another game. He lost again, this time worse than the first. They played a third and again Mr. Hancock won. At the end of the session my father was so agitated that

he could hardly speak. He had suffered Mr. Hancock's terrible laughter as well as his flawless chess, but it somehow seemed not so much the loss or ridicule he minded, not the chess, but some *other* thing. I did not understand, of course, and was extremely frightened.

Mr. Hancock would not stay for tea, a development that somehow seemed to relieve my father, for he showed the victorious man to the door, closed it, and immediately went to the sunroom and sat at the board. He sat for some time. Then he moved the pieces over the squares, touching each of them idly. "I knew it," he said at length. "I knew it."

Thinking he wanted me to respond in some way, I asked, "Knew what, Daddy?"

He said nothing, but flicked me out of the sunroom with a petulant motion of his hand. Through the french doors I watched him sit for hours, moving the pieces over the board; not playing over a game, for he never started the pieces. He just moved them, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly, but always with what seemed to be extreme agitation.

Mr. Hancock came to our house very often after that. Each time it was the same. He never lost a game, and at the end of each game he was rude,

almost contemptuous of my father. I could not understand why it was that my father did not insist he never return. But no such thing. He seemed obsessed with the little chess player, and he waited, frantically it seemed, for him to appear each day. My father was a moderately wealthy man and did not leave home very often, except perhaps on rare occasions to visit Miller's General Store, to pass the time of day and listen to Bill Miller's gossip.

We had spent much time together, my father and I. With the reappearance of Mr. Hancock, however, he had little time for me, as he spent most of his waking hours either with Mr. Hancock, taking the little man's abuses, or alone in the sunroom studying from Mr. Hancock's book, or moving the inevitable chess pieces.

It was about this time, or perhaps just a little before Mr. Hancock's return, that the Garlock's Bend Cemetery burglaries took place. There were six robberies in all, each progressively more mystifying in that state police protection was provided after the third and was increased with each subsequent robbery. At the sixth the place was literally surrounded. Yet no one was ever seen in the cemetery.

This part of my story is a bit hazy, for my interest at the time was centered about Mr. Hancock and his effect upon my father, but I do remember Mrs. Berger, who was something of a gossip, stating something to the effect that down in Garlock's Bend she heard that the cemetery guards were obsessed with the idea that there was something uncanny about the graveyard each time a grave was robbed—something they tried to and could not identify—something oppressive in the air. Just *something*.

It was difficult for me to make anything of it—she always stopped altogether or became very vague when I came into a room where they were talking. And the newspapers (I have since gone back to check) stated only that all possible was being done, that the crimes were heinous, and that investigation had shown in each case that jewelry was stolen. Mrs. Berger's informants had it that something else had been taken, and that the jewelry was but a decoy, or was all that the newspapers felt they could decently reveal. This I have since tried to justify, but cannot.

My father grew more and more agitated during the course of Mr. Hancock's visits. He slept but little, spent much time in the sunroom, had almost no

time for me, and several times shouted at Mrs. Berger. When he did sleep, his dreams seemed progressively more troubled. The mysterious phrases became more and more pronounced, and in his sleep I heard him link Mr. Hancock's name with some evil-sounding words which I cannot even now pronounce but which sent shivers through me.

Something was very wrong with my father, and Mr. Hancock seemed to be the cause.

Things got progressively worse. My father became more and more agitated and was more and more curt to Mrs. Berger and me. Then one afternoon, after hours of isolation, he came quickly from the sunroom and said to us, "I will be out for some time." It was all he said. He left Mrs. Berger and me staring at each other, for it was rare that my father should leave on an afternoon, and unheard of that he should not tell us where he was going.

He came back just as it was becoming dark outside, carrying an armload of books. As he hurried past he said something to the effect that we were forbidden to touch the books for they were quite rare and valuable. He hurried into the sunroom and locked the door. Mrs. Berger, always mundane and practical, called after him. "I've

seen about enough of books in this house."

One Sunday, soon after my father had brought home the books, and had spent great lengths of time studying them, it came to a head between the two men. Mr. Hancock, since his return, had won some hundred games. None of the games had even been close. My father was resetting the pieces as he said, "Chess is only a game."

"You cannot beat me," Mr. Hancock said. "No one can. I have not told you yet—I will be champion." It was obvious even to me that he was quite serious. His eyes narrowed, and glancing at me to see how closely I was listening, he leaned toward my father and said, "I have improved each time. I get stronger each time."

"You will be stopped," my father said slowly. "You will be stopped soon. Chess is not everything. It is a game."

"For you," the little man said. "But it is I, not you, who will be champion." He stood up as he said, "You cannot stop me. Not now. No one can stop me. No one."

My father rose also, and the two men faced each other. I huddled close to my father, who, fear and agitation somehow mastered, matched Mr. Hancock in determination. I confess

that I was extremely frightened and cannot relate any of the details of the argument which followed. It was all a noisy whirl in my mind. It ended with much anger on both sides, and my father insisting that Mr. Hancock leave the house.

All the rest of that day and evening my father was even more excited than before Mr. Hancock's visit. He seemed not fearful or hysterical but keyed up—alert and charged for action. He was extremely restless, as if desiring time to pass quickly. He spent his time at odd and incidental tasks, largely attending to domestic troubles Mrs. Berger had long before complained about—but which had been forgotten in the light of my father's recent difficulties. Too, I remember his going once or twice to the sunroom and the musty black books. Not, I should say, for study, but rather for a quick glance, as if to solidify some point in his mind.

That night he did not dress for bed, but sat in the bedroom in the large leather Queen Anne that was just opposite our bed. He did not do much but stare at me—or, rather, past me—and once I thought I heard him mumbling. I did not sleep. He thought I did, however, and at length he rose and I felt him standing over me for some min-

utes. He left, and I had a deep, sickening sensation as I heard the outside door latch click and my father's footsteps scratching down the driveway gravel.

I was quite frightened all night and could not help imagining terrible things that were happening to my father, not to mention the awful things I supposed him to be doing.

It was four or five o'clock, just beginning to dawn, when he returned. He undressed and came to bed, and although he did not sleep for some little time—he just stared at the ceiling—he soon dropped into a deep repose. I assumed my father's calm and slept soundly.

When I dressed and went down to breakfast, my father was talking matter-of-factly to Mrs. Berger. She, as usual, had an excellent breakfast ready, and, relieved from sleep and cheered by my father's good mood, I satisfied an intense and sudden hunger.

My father did not eat much, but seemed, although better and although he talked to us intermittently, somewhat preoccupied. He responded to questions sometimes with an answer and sometimes with a startled glance. I suppose I bothered him too much, for Mrs. Berger's strict looks indicated clearly to me that I had best leave off.

His better mood (for he was not nearly so badly off as he had been) cheered us both. Too, as a small boy I had a small boy's fickle concentration, and my interests quickly returned to my own world. I excused myself and left the table.

In the afternoon of that day all was as it had been before. I was allowed back into the sun-room, and I sat idly playing Carrom while my father sat at the chess board setting the pieces and then making eight or ten moves for both sides. He stopped, reset the men, and played another eight or ten moves—all this over and over. I know now, but did not then, that he was doing what chess players call "studying the openings." He was calm and relaxed, almost casual. I look back now and recognize this attitude as some sort of newly acquired confidence.

I sat on the floor in the middle of that bright sunny room as I played, my legs straddling the Carrom board. Of a sudden I became aware of a presence in the doorway. It was Mr. Hancock. I could not seem to control myself, for the sight of the awful man sent the blood rushing through me, and I crayfished back across the floor until I was between my father's legs.

He looked up and said, "I have been waiting for you."

"Our game," said Mr. Hancock.

"Of course," my father said, resetting the pieces. "We will play only one game today. I shall play the white." Mr. Hancock looked startled, and it seemed as if he were about to say something, but my father insisted. Mr. Hancock tilted his head quizzically and gazed long at my father, but then seemed to recover his confidence and nodded assent.

My father moved.

Mr. Hancock rushed to the board, dropped his coat to the floor, and with pudgy fingers hastily moved his king pawn two squares, opposing my father's moved pawn. My father moved the knight to king bishop three, and again his move was imitated by Mr. Hancock.

"The Petroff," grunted my father, naming the game.

"I love to play it," said Mr. Hancock, smiling as my father captured the pawn.

My father stopped suddenly and looked at me. "I think you had better leave," he said. I could not help being hurt when he said it, for I was certain that everything was about to start over, and I did not want again to see my father so terribly upset. I left and stood behind the closed french doors for some time, watching. My father moved as he had of old, and Mr.

Hancock moved quickly also, but both slowed down quite soon and then both moved slowly, my father perhaps a little the slower. I could neither see the game nor hear what they said, so I left after a time. I went down to the riverside to play for a while by the water and then to sit and watch the fishermen, a pastime that had become one of my favorites. But I could not get that terrible game out of my mind.

It was Mrs. Berger, next morning, who discovered it. She was reading the *Scranton Tribune* and said suddenly, "Oh, my God! Mr. Hancock's dead."

My father looked up from his coffee.

"Oh, my sweet Jesus!" she cried, dropping the newspaper. "It happened early this morning. He was hit by an automobile."

My father said nothing, and I just stared at him, feeling, I am ashamed to say, just a little relieved that Mr. Hancock *was* dead. Mrs. Berger was quite shocked, and started to cry. She raved on and on about him—saying that he seemed so gentle, so harmless, so devoted to chess—for quite some time. She gained control of herself somewhat, and then asked the inevitable, "Why did it have to happen to him?"

"I beat him at chess yesterday," said my father quietly.

"What? What has that to do with anything?" she said.

"Nothing," my father said.

That is the substance of my story. I have chronicled it in as great detail as I honestly might, and I am aware of the weaknesses in its accusations. But there *are* indications, and they are not all in the mind of a romantic rehearsing his youth, either. Empirically, the evidence weighs against Mr. Hancock; taken individually each occurrence might be explained innocently. Consider, for example, the emotional changes my father suffered. These really could have been due to chess losses alone. The books he got may have been innocent of all interest in Mr. Hancock and the grave robberies, and then again they may not. Staunton College, a religious school about a dozen miles down river from Garlock's Bend, where he got the books, had a rare book collection—the Moses W. Klien-dorfer Collection of the Occult and Orientalia. These are subjects which, considering everything, do not sound entirely innocent. But I have checked and the books, unfortunately, are gone—like so many important parts to this story.

My father may have left the

house that last night for purely harmless reasons. Again, he may have had a significant retaliatory purpose of his own. Something to do with the books, for example.

I can say for a fact that the molesting of the graves stopped completely with the death of Mr. Hancock; *that* much is obtainable from the newspapers. It may have been a coincidence, or (can I really be saying this?) he *may have* robbed the graves. I don't know—he may have stolen some *thing* each time, these used or given in exchange for supernormal chess prowess. What it was which might have been taken is impossible to say. Nothing was ever made public, but *something else* had been removed from the graves, Mrs. Berger had said. On the face of it, this all makes me want to laugh, and yet I am almost too afraid.

Mr. Hancock's death itself may have been completely an accident, or may have been directed, caused by some evil or malignant force—a force disenchanted with him perhaps. Occult theory (I know, I *know*, I am as skeptical as the next man, but nonetheless . . .), occult theory has it that when the earthly ally or representative of evil is rendered impotent (by good or by the instruments of good), the evil thing destroys its

representative, and to deflect any investigation, does it in as innocent a manner as possible. An automobile accident, for example.

Mrs. Berger is long dead, and likely could not help in any case. She made some quite pointed statements, as I look back, but I put it rather to the intuitive powers of a phlegmatic nature rather than to any knowledge she might have had.

The books are gone. Both the foul-looking ones of Mr. Hancock and those my father brought home—nowhere to be found. I have tried and can find no trace of either set. I have the uneasy feeling that they *will* one day turn up, but I pray not.

So . . . nothing positive either way. I really don't know. Perhaps Mr. Hancock was nothing more than a harmless chess fanatic. Perhaps not.

The most damning evidence

was my father. He had changed somehow, after Mr. Hancock's death. He seemed a bit more aware of his surroundings than the rest of us. And he looked about all the time, this way and that, as if attempting to catch sight of something. He seemed a bit older, a bit more tired, had perhaps, I don't know, perhaps a *deeper* look. He destroyed his chess pieces and all remembrances of the game, and forbade Mrs. Berger and me to ever mention chess.

Years later I broke my promise to him and asked my father why it was that from the time of Mr. Hancock's death he played no more chess. Again the maddening ambiguity as my mind flashed to the terrible event which followed Mr. Hancock's last game.

Innocent or significant, his reply was, "I can't. I dare not lose."

Hit Man

by Sam Pizzo



Vinny stabbed the doorbell with his knife. He'd never killed a person before, not even a little one. The guys at the pool hall killed people all the time. Said it was easy. Zap. Drink a beer. Shoot a rack of pool. Go to bed.

The sun was hot. Vinny was impatient to get the job done. His black turtleneck sweater and black leather pants clung like plastic-wrap and the ski mask scratched his face. Only his nose was comfortable.

He stabbed the bell again and held it until a rectangular peephole in the door slid open. A woman's face came into view, her eyes peering over the top, then around the side of a large martini, trying to focus in the vicinity of the front porch.

"You are interfering with my . . ." the woman unskewered an olive with her front teeth " . . . happy hour."

Vinny didn't care what he was interfering with, and he didn't like talking all that much, especially to eyes.

"I don't care what you . . ." the woman teetered back from the peephole as if blown away by a gentle breeze, then wafted back " . . . like."

Vinny didn't like grouchy broads, either. Reminded him of Mrs. Bombauer, his third sixth-grade teacher. He hitched up his pants and flashed his knife. No more talking. No more fooling around. Hands up!

"Do you want my hands up?" asked the woman facing into the wind. "Or do you want my hands and arms up?"

Not too bright, this doll. Didn't she know if the hands go up, the arms go too? And if the arms go up, the . . .

"Okay, okay," said the woman draining the last of her drink. "First hand up. Second hand up. Third hand. Fourth." She looked up. "Hello hands."

Vinny wanted funny, he'd watch TV. He stepped closer to the peephole. Thumbed the blade of his knife. Open the door!

"Can't open the door with my hands up there," said the woman, winking at the front porch.

The doll had a point. Okay, hands down.

"If I put my hands down," said the woman, "the gun in my right hand might go off and make a hole in the door."

Vinny would not like that. The guys at the pool hall never told him he could get hurt. It was supposed to be easy. (Zap. Drink a beer. Shoot a rack of pool. Go to bed!) Best if she put one hand down.

"Which one?"

Vinny was not good at thinking, making decisions. It made his head spin.

"Do you want to lie down?"

If she didn't mind. Just a minute till his head cleared. The cement cooled Vinny's body, and the doormat made a reasonable pillow.

"Comfy?"

Vinny was comfortable enough, thank you.

"Don't jab yourself with that rusty little knife," said the woman.

Don't worry about Vinny. He could take care of himself and he'd had a tetanus shot—if she must know.

"Wouldn't it be better to use a big knife?" asked the woman.

Big knife, little knife, dead was dead.

"Of course," said the woman, "but using a big knife would be so much easier. You wouldn't have to punch so many little holes."

Vinny was not afraid of hard work. Besides, it was his favorite knife. Had it since he was a boy. Left it in the rain a few times and some of the blades were rusted shut, but the can opener, the punch tool, and the small knife blade worked pretty good—as if it was any of her business.

"My husband hired you to kill me, didn't he?"

A business deal. Nothing personal.

"It is to me," said the woman, "very personal."

The doll was driving Vinny ape. All the time talking. Won't do no good. She was dead, comma.

"Period," corrected the woman.

Whatever. Vinny closed his eyes. Wished she'd go away.

"How much is he paying you?"

Couldn't she see he didn't feel well?

"Come on. How much?"

Vinny didn't talk price with the husband, but he never worked for less than minimum wage.

"If you kill my husband instead of me," said the woman, "I'll pay you minimum wage . . . plus carfare."

Vinny wasn't particular who he killed, long as he got paid. All he cared, he'd kill them both. Not a bad idea, that. Kill both, collect twice minimum wage . . . plus carfare.

"If you kill both of us," said the woman, "nobody will be around to pay you."

That could be a problem, but Vinny'd think of something. He had ways.

"What ways?"

Vinny wanted to change the subject.

"Don't change the subject."

Maybe he'd put a lien on their house, okay? Or he'd go to the Labor Commissioner, okay? He didn't know. He wanted to be left alone. His mind was confused. His head was pounding.

"Do you want an aspirin?"

Vinny would like that. And a glass of water.

"Don't go away," said the woman. "I'll fix another martini and Angelina, my maid, will bring you an aspirin." The woman sailed away from the peephole, reappearing seconds later. "And a glass of water."

Vinny was discouraged. Being a hit man was hard work. Maybe he shouldn't've quit his job at the fish market. He wished Angelina would hurry with the aspirin. Angelina, nice name that. Good sound to it. Same as Mama's (may she rest in peace) name.

Angelina's fingers appeared in the peephole holding an aspirin. Vinny rose to his feet. He took the tablet, allowing his fingers to linger against hers a little longer than necessary.

Her fingers fluttered and disappeared into the peephole, the entire hand returning with a glass of ice water. It was a plump hand with fingers round and stubby, not skinny little twigs that snap like vermicelli. Vinny wrapped his hands around hers, giving it a provocative squeeze. The hand quivered and slipped slowly from his grasp, leaving the glass.

Standing on tiptoe, Vinny could see the top of her head, her shiny black hair crowned by a pretty white bow. Vinny pressed his face up to the peephole just as Angelina stood on tiptoe. Her face filled the opening and they bumped noses. Her breath smelled like pepperoni. She giggled. She was gone.

Vinny was rubbery on the inside. He wanted to sing.

"Frank Sinatra, you are not," said the woman, veering back to the peephole with a fresh martini.

An upstairs window opened and the husband's head appeared. "Is she dead yet?"

Vinny didn't think so.

"Would it be too much trouble," said the husband, drumming his fingers on the windowsill, "to find out one way or the other?"

"Tell him I'm very much alive," said the wife to Vinny. "Tell him you're working for me now. And tell him I offered you a better deal."

Vinny couldn't remember all that.

"I heard her," said the husband with an indignant thump on the window shutter. "I have been loyal to you, but from this day forward I will go elsewhere to buy my fish."

Big deal. Vinny was in business for himself now. Vinny didn't work at the fish market no more, and he could buy his fish at A&P for all Vinny cared. Besides, Vinny didn't want to think about that. He wanted to think about Angelina. He touched the spot on his nose where it had bumped Angelina's. It felt smooth, velvety. He went rubbery again.

"What did he say?" asked the husband.

"I think there's something wrong with his nose," said the wife.

"If you kill her and not me," said the husband, "I'll give you one hundred dollars and a month's supply of Dristan."

"Five hundred," said the wife, "and my gold Mercedes."

Vinny had never driven a Mercedes.

"Automatic with air and stereo."

Vinny could see himself driving into the sunset with Angelina in the bucket by his side, listening to his Dean Martin tapes.

Oh, how Vinny's heart hungered for Angelina. How he longed to see her again. If he asked for a cup of coffee, she would bring it, right? Then he would see her again, right? Vinny wouldn't kill anybody until he had some coffee and maybe a couple of doughnuts.

"I will get Angelina," said the wife. "No talking until I get back." The wife disappeared from the peephole.

"One thousand," whispered the husband, "my best race horse, and two dozen doughnuts."

Vinny had never ridden a horse.

"Giddyap and whoa."

Vinny could see himself crossing the finish line ten lengths ahead of the pack, Angelina at home knitting little things, eating doughnuts, and listening to the race results on Vinny's boom box.

Angelina's hand appeared in the peephole holding a cup of coffee with lots of cream and sugar (just the way Vinny liked it) and two sugar doughnuts (his favorite).

They stood on tiptoe inspecting each other at close range through the peephole. Soft gurgling sounds bubbled in Angelina's throat. She picked little fuzz balls from Vinny's ski mask, her hand brushing against the nakedness of his nose. Her fingers smelled like chicken tetrazzini. Vinny was drunk with emotion.

"What did he say?" asked the husband.

"I think he's drunk," said the wife, easing Angelina from the peephole.

"Fifty thousand dollars," said the husband, "and two weeks at the Bide-A-Wee Health Food Ranch."

"Seventy-five thousand," said the wife, "and all the booze you want."

Vinny didn't want to hear any more negotiating. He wanted to look at flowers, fill up with fresh air, think about the birds and wasps.

"Bees," corrected the wife.

Bees, wasps, who cares. Vinny was in love. He was happy. He wanted them to be happy, too. He wished they'd kiss and make up.

"I'd sooner kiss his race horses."

"I'd sooner she not."

"Here's my final offer," said the wife, "my half of everything we own—house, cars, fur coats, jewelry, everything." She disappeared from the peephole for a moment. "There. I've put it in writing." She passed a paper to Vinny through the peephole.

"And my final offer," said the husband, "my half of everything we own—boat, horses, stocks and bonds, everything." He disappeared from the upstairs window for a moment. "There. I, too, have put it in writing." He folded the paper into an airplane and sailed it to Vinny from the upstairs window.

"Now you've done it," said the wife. "We're broke."

"By God, we are, aren't we," said the husband. "I wonder if he will lend us a few hundred thousand until we get back on our feet."

Vinny would like to help them out, but he couldn't. His mama always said, If-a-you lend, lose-a-you friend.

"Then you'll have to *give* it back to us," said the wife.

Vinny couldn't do that either. He was sorry they didn't have anything left, but he liked everything just the way it was, and since they had no further business in his house, they should leave . . . by the tradesman's entrance.

"If he knew I still had a gun in my right hand," said the wife, "he might change his mind."

"I think it will speed up his thinking," said the husband, "if you fire a few shots through the door."

Vinny heard the gun's safety mechanism click. Through the peephole, he saw the wife closing one eye, getting ready to . . . Then Vinny saw a pudgy hand with stubby fingers karate chop the wife's neck. Vinny heard the gun hit the floor. Then the wife.

Holding hands, Vinny and Angelina toured his estate—twenty acres with stables, horses, four cars, and a fifteen-room house. In the basement, a recreation room with a pool table, a jukebox, and a refrigerator filled with beer.

Angelina put a quarter in the jukebox. She approached Vinny with eyes lowered, palms pressing the front of her maid's apron, gun wedged in her bosom. With a shy smile, she hooked her finger in the nose hole of Vinny's ski mask and pulled it off. She giggled.

Vinny folded his knife and slipped it into his pocket. He was satisfied with the day's work. And the guys at the pool hall were right. It was easy.

Vinny opened the refrigerator. Angelina want a beer?

She nodded.

Vinny chalked up a cue stick. Shoot a rack of pool?

Nod.

Vinny yawned. Bed?

Giggle.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

Waiting for whom? And why here? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.



“Ah, wonder if you could help me? I think I’d like to talk to a witch.”

“Sure, man, no problem. Look down on the end of the counter there, next to the amulets. There’s a lotta business cards people leave.” The clerk shook

back his long blond hair and continued arranging the small jars on the shelf above his head.

Wenzel walked over to the counter. The shop was new, painted in cheerful pastels and brightly lit, but the aisles were narrow and cluttered. He

stepped carefully to avoid bumping the displays of feathers and small idols. God only knew what might happen if you knocked something over in here.

The business cards were Scotch-taped to the glass countertop. SANDRA'S SPELLS, SEANCES AND MAGIC SHOWS. Institutional rates available. Palm reading. YOUR PAST AND FUTURE REVEALED. LADY RACHEL. He frowned and made his way over to the wall where the clerk was standing on an aluminum ladder arranging stock.

"None of those looks like what I had in mind. Could you recommend someone, perhaps?"

From his perch the clerk gave Wenzel an appraising glance. Proper three-piece suit, horn-rimmed glasses, indoor pallor, and troubled eyes. "Maybe I can help. Depends on what you need." He sat down atop the ladder, fished in the pocket of his faded denim shirt, and came up with a small red box. He offered some to Wenzel.

"No, thank you, I don't. . . ." Wenzel murmured.

The clerk shook some raisins into his palm and began munching them one at a time. "Look, mister, we get a lotta customers here at the Occult Emporium. Some are just curious, some are tourists, and some are a little kinky, if you

get my drift. Maybe you better tell me whatcha got in mind."

"Yes, well. . . ." Now that he had to put it into words he realized how inane it would sound. It was just an impulse, and a stupid one at that. "I'm afraid I'm running a bit late. Perhaps I could come back another time and—"

"It's an affair of the heart, isn't it?"

Wenzel turned, startled. A small, sturdy woman in a dark blue pants suit and pillbox hat was standing a few steps away.

"Hi, Mrs. Coglin." The clerk stepped down from the ladder. "Sorry, I didn't see you come in. Your order's back in the back." He brushed aside a star-splashed curtain and disappeared through a narrow door behind the counter.

"Well, is it? An affair of the heart?" she asked.

"Actually it's a private matter that I'd rather not discuss."

"Nonsense. You have a problem and you wouldn't be asking George for help if you thought you could get it anywhere else. Correct?"

Wenzel said nothing.

"Well? Am I correct or not?"

"Ah, yes, I suppose so."

"You seem healthy enough, and you look competent so it probably isn't business, sooo . . . a problem of the heart." Her smile was cool and specu-

lative. "What did you have in mind? A potion to slip into her coffee?"

"Certainly not. It's not like that at all."

"Well," she said calmly, "perhaps if you'd tell me what it is like, I might be able to suggest something."

"Here's the stuff you ordered, Mrs. Coglin," the clerk said, brushing past the curtain. "A-number one as usual. Put it on your account?"

"Yes, thank you, George." She took the small parcel and turned to Wenzel. "You're facing the classic dilemma, you know, to change your fortune or endure it. Of course, George might like to recommend someone else. . . .?"

"No way, Mrs. Coglin. Mister, I don't know what your problem is, but you're standin' next to a lady who can help you."

Wenzel's eyebrows rose. "You mean she's. . . .?"

"She's totally top of the heap."

"George, perhaps you should introduce us."

"Gee, I ah, I don't really know this guy, Mrs. Coglin."

"I'm—" he coughed. "My name is Harold Wenzel."

"*Enchanté*, Mr. Wenzel," she said dryly, "I'm Lilith Coglin. Would you care to discuss the matter further?"

Wenzel glanced at the clerk,

who nodded. "All right, Mrs. Coglin, why not?"

"Fine. There's a restaurant just up the block, if that will do. Good afternoon, George."

"Bye, Mrs. Coglin. Have a nice day." He watched the shop door close behind them, shaking his head slowly. "And lotsa luck to you, buddy."

The restaurant had a western motif, wagon wheel chandeliers, branded tables. They were herded to a rear booth by a bustling cowgirl in a white hat, boots, and gunbelt. Wenzel scanned the menu in silence, using the opportunity to covertly examine his companion.

She wasn't as old as she'd first appeared to be, late thirtiyish, perhaps forty. Her conservative clothing made her seem older, and pinning her dark hair up under the ridiculous pillbox hat didn't help. Her features were regular and unblemished. She was a bit on the heavy side, but all in all, a handsome woman in a matronly sort of way.

"Looking for the wart on the end of my nose, Mr. Wenzel?"

"Sorry. You don't, well, you don't look like a witch. Or at least not what I expected a witch to look like."

"If you mean Margaret Ruth-erford in green makeup, I'll

take that as a compliment. The resemblance is closer though, first thing in the morning. Mr. Wenzel, I'm a very direct person by nature, and I sense that in you also. Why don't we just skip the pleasantries and get to the . . . agenda for today's meeting."

He hesitated. "Look, I usually have no trouble dealing with strangers. I do it all the time, but this is personal, and—"

"Mr. Wenzel, most people have problems with the opposite sex. If yours were ordinary, I imagine you'd be talking to your analyst instead of me. Still," she added gently, "if I'm going to be of any help, you'll have to overcome your reluctance and tell me what the problem is."

"You're right, of course," he said slowly, "and you were right in the shop also. It is an . . . affair of the heart, or rather, I wish it was."

"Please go on." Her smile was encouraging.

"Her name is Michelle Koster. She's . . . probably not what most people would consider a dream girl, she's . . . shrewd and ambitious. She'll probably be the first woman president of IDEX."

"IDEX?"

"IDEX Industrial Fabrics. We make everything from parachutes to bullet-proof vests."

"I see."

"Michelle was transferred into the section I head, stress studies, a month ago. From the very first day I've known she's the right woman for me. The only one. I can feel it to the center of my soul." He broke off, startled by the emotion in his tone.

"You're not an unattractive man, so . . . is she married? I don't understand."

"I suppose she's married in a way," he sighed, "to her career. She's from a small town in Indiana and she's been with IDEX six or seven years. This transfer is her first big break and she's well aware of it."

"I still don't—"

"Company policy flatly forbids dating between supervisors and staff. We could both be fired."

"Still, if it's so important to you. . . ."

"Oh, I tried. I assembled what I thought was a logical campaign, and invited her to a working lunch. She heard me out politely, pointed out the risk, and that was that. I tried to, I don't know, just get her off my mind, but I couldn't. So I sent her some flowers, but ah. . . . She not only declined to risk her job, she threatened to charge me with sexual harassment if I bothered her again, and to use the flowers and the card as evidence."

"I see."

"That was about ten days ago. She's still polite, but she's very cold now, and . . . I've been very unhappy." He removed his glasses and massaged his eyes. His hands were trembling.

"My, my, we do have a problem." She beckoned to a passing cowgirl. "Could we have two cups of tea and a bowl of chicken soup, please? Thank you."

Wenzel smiled in spite of himself. "Is that your remedy? Or do you have something more specific in mind?"

"It's an excellent remedy," Lilith said, returning his smile, "but not really appropriate. There is a remedy, though, for your problem, or at least the beginnings of one."

He eyed her skeptically. "What sort of remedy?"

"I can bring you together for an evening," she said calmly.

"An evening? But—"

"If she's truly the one, perhaps an evening will be enough."

"No, I, please don't be offended, Mrs. Coglin, but you're telling me you can arrange a meeting? Just like that? I don't understand."

"It isn't necessary that you understand. Do you repair your own television set?"

"No, but—" He paused, disconcerted, as their order arrived.

"Here you go, folks, and if you

want anything else, just holler." The waitress bustled off, dripping chicken soup from the white fringe on her sleeve.

"You didn't question the cowgirl," Lilith said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your lunch was just delivered by a woman wearing a cowboy hat and plastic pistols, and you accepted it without question." She shook her head, smiling. "Look around you, Mr. Wenzel. We're living in Xanadu, a world filled with wonders and curiosities we scarcely notice, let alone understand. Electricity, atomic power, life itself. We use these forces every day without truly understanding *why* they work."

"But as a scientist—"

"If you're hoping for a scientific explanation, I'm afraid I can't oblige. The power of our craft is the power of the mind, and while some technical advances have proved useful, its source remains what it's always been, and it is not translatable into your terms."

"Still—" he said doubtfully.

She leaned forward, her eyes searching his face. "As a scientist and a businessman facing a difficult problem, perhaps you should simply concern yourself with results. Can I accomplish what I say I can? Yes," she said, her smile fading, "I can."

He regarded her thoughtfully, sipping his tea. "There is a fee, no doubt?"

"Of course. The fee will be twelve hundred dollars."

"Twelve hundred dollars!"

"Exactly. I'm very good at what I do, Mr. Wenzel, and my fees reflect it. However, since you're a new account, no payment will be required until I've completed my part of the bargain."

"Suppose I do decide to—go ahead with this. When would you be able to begin working on it?"

"Begin? Mr. Wenzel, I can fulfill our agreement as soon as you wish. Tonight, if you like."

"Tonight?"

"If tonight is inconvenient. . . ."

"No, no, it's not that. I just assumed it would—take longer." He leaned toward her, unable to conceal his eagerness. "You mean I could see her, be with her, tonight?"

"What you're asking for is a bit unfashionable these days, but not difficult."

He stared at her in open speculation. "All right," he nodded abruptly, "how do we manage it?"

"My business address is on this card. It's also my home. Is eleven tonight convenient?"

"Eleven? Isn't that an hour early?"

She didn't smile. "You're a rational man, Mr. Wenzel, and your misgivings are understandable. I don't mind that. The only thing I do insist upon is your discretion. Anonymity is very important to me. Understood?"

"You needn't worry about that. I certainly won't tell anybody about this. They'd have me committed. Do you—require a retainer or a deposit or anything?"

"That won't be necessary." She rose and gathered up her parcel. "In my line of work," she said coolly, "collections are never a problem. Have a nice day, Mr. Wenzel."

The address was in an upper middle class subdivision in the foothills south of the city. The streets had names like Windsor Court and Plantagenet Place. The homes were large, mostly colonial, with long circular drives and broad lawns bejeweled by whispering sprinkler systems. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but the house seemed reassuringly commonplace. The woman who answered the door was not.

"Good evening. You must be Mr. Wenzel?" She had a prominent accent, German perhaps. "Please come in. My name is Nora. Lilith is in the library."

Nora was tall and Nordic with wide shoulders and closely cropped wheat-colored hair. Her eyes, steel-gray and narrow, had an almost Asiatic look which was accented by her gown, a floor-length sky blue caftan embroidered in silver. Following her down the hallway was an unsettling experience.

Lilith Coglin was seated at an ornately carved desk scanning a computer printout sheet, her face a pale green in the reflected light of the video display. The room looked more like a corporate data center than a private library, with more filing cabinets and disc expansion systems than books. Lilith's own appearance was equally severe, black, unadorned caftan and steel-rimmed spectacles, and yet she seemed much more relaxed. Her hair was unpinned, flowing dark to her shoulders.

"Ah, Mr. Wenzel, how nice. I confess I wasn't sure you'd come." Her smile seemed genuine, melting some of his misgivings.

"I wasn't too sure either, Mrs. Coglin, but—"

"Lilith. Please call me Lilith." She came from behind the desk and took his hand. "Actually I shouldn't have doubted you. In business," she waved airily at the computer consoles and the steel storage cabinets lining

the walls, "motivations are often obscure, but in love, well, one forgets what a powerful force it is. I'm looking forward to working with it again."

"You don't handle my sort of—problem often, then?"

"No, not any more. I'm afraid romance has been largely displaced by the demands of commerce. In fact, I think a toast might be in order in honor of the occasion. Nora?"

"Champagne?" A wall panel slid open at the taller woman's touch, revealing a well-stocked wine rack. She deliberated a moment, then chose a bottle and opened it expertly. The goblets were crystal, delicately etched.

"A toast. Mr. Wenzel, as our guest, the honor falls to you." Lilith removed her glasses. Her eyes were bright, and for the first time he was struck by their emerald depth. He could feel electricity in the room, and the ache that had lately become a part of him seemed to ebb a bit. He raised his goblet. The champagne trembled in the light.

"To my hosts, then, and to success," he said, and drained his glass. "All right, how do we start?"

"First we have to prepare a few things. Your mindset for one."

"My mind?"

"You're a rational man, Har-

old, a scientist, which means you're a skeptic by definition," Lilith said. "There's a negativity in your attitude toward life in general. It's normal these days, but it might tend to hamper our work. You need to alter it a little."

"What do I do? Meditate or something?"

"Nothing so complicated," she smiled. "I don't require a leap of faith, but it will help if you can . . . suspend your disbelief a bit."

"I guess I can try."

"*Gut*," Nora said, "and of course you must remoof your clothing."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nora, please," Lilith frowned. "It's a—matter of receptivity, Mr. Wenzel. Our clothes affect our perceptions. They armor us against the world. There's a dressing room across the hall with robes of various sorts. Pick one you like, and discard your armor. Nora and I have other preparations to make. Come to the room at the end of the hallway when you've changed."

The changing room might have been lifted intact from an upscale London tailor, dark paneling, discreet lighting, a basin of marble, *real* marble. Robes in several colors hung from wooden pegs. He chose a gold one, em-

broidered in scarlet. He automatically rolled the fabric between his fingertips. Nothing synthetic about it, it was raw silk, and a very delicate weave. The material seemed to caress his skin.

The mirror above the basin reflected someone only vaguely familiar. "Goodbye, Harold; hello, Kublai," he murmured. He raised his arms, spreading the robe, and revolved slowly in front of the mirror, examining his image as he turned. The room continued rotating for a moment after he'd stopped.

In the hallway his progress was a bit unsteady. The room at the end was a large, open hexagon with deep burgundy carpeting, almost barren of furniture. Three of the walls were french doors, open to the summer night. The others were paneled in rough cedar, giving the room a medieval ambience. There was a leather couch against one wall and a massive, backless throne, deeply carved, in the center of the room. A rack of sound equipment recessed in the wall above the couch and the translucent ceiling panels overhead were the only modern touches.

Lilith was waiting for him just inside the door.

"Well? How do I look?" He pirouetted slowly into the room.

"You look fine," she said

coolly. "Lie on the couch, please, and try to relax." She touched a control panel beside the door, and the light from the ceiling began to wane.

Harold made his way carefully to the couch. The carpet seemed to change color beneath his feet as the light dimmed. The center of the ceiling darkened, throwing a shadow on the throne and the floor around it. The shadow of a star. A pentagram. The leather couch seemed to shudder as he sat down. He gazed at her thoughtfully for a moment.

"The wine was drugged, wasn't it?"

She came to him slowly out of the shadow, her face expressionless. "Perhaps you've no head for champagne. You're not much of a carouser, are you?" She sank to her knees beside the couch.

"I suppose not. I try not to be a stick-in-the-mud, but with my work . . . well, you understand."

"Yes," she said gently. "I do understand." Her voice was low and she seemed very close. "Perhaps tonight will be your reward for a virtuous life." Her scent was both rare and familiar. He could feel the electricity of her presence, of her nearness. Her voice became almost a chant. "I shall be your friend. I will be your power. I shall

gather to you what you most desire. This I shall do, so mote it be." She touched his hair and he could feel the warmth of her through to his core. His hands clenched.

"The woman of your dreams," she whispered, "is she your wish?"

"Yes." His voice was unsteady. He tried to meet her eyes, but they were much too deep, too dark.

"She is what you want most in the world, you're sure?" It was as though the night breeze was speaking softly, only to him.

"Yes," he said, with as much conviction as he could muster, "she is what I want most."

"Then so mote it be." Her smile was enigmatic. "Will you help me?"

"Yes, of course, but . . . what should I do?" His breathing was uneven.

She reached across him and lifted a plastic headband from a hook. "Take this and slip it on your forehead." Her voice was soothing and hypnotic. He could feel it resonate above his heart. "Are you familiar with biofeedback?"

"I studied it briefly in college," he swallowed, "I know what it is."

"Good. I want you to concentrate, to picture her in your mind. When you have her firmly

fixed, this light panel," she indicated a translucent square beneath the sound equipment inset in the wall above him, "this panel will change color from blue to amber. Blue is not strong enough, red is too much. Amber is the color you must have, the color of her hair, perhaps?"

"No, her hair is darker. Auburn. The color of an oak in the autumn," he said dreamily.

"An oak? My, my, my." She reached across him and pressed a switch. The sound equipment flickered to life and the reels of the tape deck began revolving slowly above him. The soft drone of a synthesizer filled the room and, barely audible above it, the sound of a woman humming quietly to herself.

Lilith moved to the backless throne in the shadow of the star. She lowered herself to it, her legs folded beneath her in a lotus position. She shook the robe from her shoulders and raised her face to the darkness, her skin alabaster in the gloom. Her sturdy torso and heavy breasts gave an aura of force rather than sensuality; still, as he watched her, the panel above him shifted from blue to amber to deep red.

Her eyes were closed, but even in the dim light he thought he could see the beginnings of a smile. With a conscious effort

of will, he turned his thoughts to Michelle, her walk, her hair, the warmth of her eyes, the quick coolness of her intellect. His thoughts called to her, and the amber panel above him pulsed in time with his heart, a beacon of his hopes.

He sensed a lifting of the darkness. He wasn't sure how much time had passed but knew it was still hours before the dawn. A figure stood in the open doorway, wraithlike, silhouetted in the starlight, wearing a filmy peignoir that flowed about her like gossamer in the night breeze. It was Michelle.

He sat up, carefully controlling his breathing. He closed his eyes for a moment, then slowly reopened them. It *was* Michelle.

She walked toward him uncertainly, past the still figure of Lilith, carved in stone. Her gaze absorbed the medieval room. He waited, afraid to move.

"I don't understand," she said slowly, "what's going on? Why am I here?"

"I guess you're here because sometimes dreams come true."

"A dream?" she said doubtfully, "is that what this is?" She reached down and touched his face lightly. "You look quite different without your glasses."

"You don't look at all differ-

ent. You're as lovely as I always imagined you would be."

"I guess this must be a dream," she smiled impishly. "Clark Kent waxes poetic."

"Clark Kent?"

"That's your nickname around the office. You're always so grim."

"Please, Michelle, I may seem too serious, I know, but—" he rose and the room wobbled on its axis. He grasped her shoulders to steady himself.

"Are you all right?" Her eyes showed concern, and he felt himself sinking into them.

"No," he said simply, "but you always affect me this way."

"I see," she said softly. He could sense her intellect at work, absorbing, analyzing.

"Well, are my parameters congruent with requirements? Do I pass?"

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"Maybe it's X-ray vision."

"Maybe you've had too much to dream." Her hands slid up to his shoulders. "You still look a little unsteady. Maybe you'd better sit down."

"Michelle, please, there are things I want to say, and—"

"No." Her eyes were steady and he could feel their force. "I don't think so. Whatever this is, whatever dreams are, I don't think we should spend it talking." She pushed him down

gently, her hands sliding beneath the fabric of his robe, slipping it over his shoulders. "Thank God," she murmured, "I was afraid you might have a blue suit on under there, but it's not going to be that kind of a dream at all."

His lips found the hollow of her throat. Above them, the light panel shifted to red, its pulse increasing until it became a steady glow.

"Harold." She gently pushed his shoulder. He cupped his hand over hers, trapping it against his skin, and slowly opened his eyes. She was leaning over him, her robe open, and he could see the pentagram tattooed over her heart.

"My God, Lilith!" He sat bolt upright, a big mistake. His head seemed poorly attached. He scanned the empty room. "Michelle?"

"She's gone, Harold. The hour is past."

"What time is it?" He rubbed his eyes.

"Nearly dawn. Around six, I think. I would have let you sleep, but—"

"Listen, Lilith, I have to see her again, just for a moment. There were things I didn't say, I—"

She smiled, slowly fastening

her robe. "Harold, if she'd been here a month I imagine there'd be things you didn't say. Judging from your appearance, you didn't waste much time talking anyway."

"No," he said, becoming aware that his robe was bunched around his waist, "no, I suppose we didn't." Somehow, he didn't feel self-conscious with Lilith. It was all right. Everything was all right.

"Things—went well?" She gently removed the narrow plastic band from his forehead and placed it on its hook.

"The only way it could have been better would be if it'd lasted longer, but after tonight I guess we'll have plenty of time."

"Perhaps so. Speaking of time, it's nearly time for breakfast. Would you care to join us?"

"No, thanks, I'd better get home and change for work. To be honest, I don't think I could face food just now, but I'm not sure if it's because I feel so good or so awful." He smiled. "Either way, it was worth it."

"We do our best."

"Well, you certainly succeed. Your fee, madam, and I might add, a modest one under the circumstances, how would you like it?"

"In cash," she said, expressionless. "Give it to George at the Emporium."

"Fine, I'll take care of it on my lunch hour. Oops, or perhaps not until after work. I'll probably have a date for lunch."

"A date?"

"Of course," he grinned, "last night was only the beginning—"

"Harold," she said firmly, "last night was only last night."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I said. I didn't promise you a new life. I promised to bring your love to you, and that's what I did."

"I realize that, but she cares about me now."

"Harold, it was only a dream."

"A dream?" he said, his voice rising. "No. She was here, by God, she was real!"

"For you it was real. To her, it was a dream. Do you remember your dreams?"

His shoulders sagged. "I don't understand. I didn't just imagine it. She was so..." He shook his head wistfully. "You don't think she'll remember?"

"She may remember something, but if you start babbling about the great time you had last night, she'll probably have you arrested."

"I see," he said slowly. "All right... all right, I can accept that. But... it was still worth it." He looked up at her, the pain transparent in his eyes. "It was still worth it."

"Good. I'm glad it was. Are you sure you won't have break-

fast? You look as though you could use it."

"No, I—thank you, no."

"All right, then. Well," she said, rising, "it's been a pleasure doing business with you."

He stared at her outstretched hand for a moment, then accepted it. "Yes, ma'am, it certainly has." They shook hands formally, and then she left him, her robe whispering its farewells to the room.

He stood up after she'd gone, still a bit unsteady, and slipped into the golden robe. His head felt at least two sizes too large.

His reflection in the dressing room mirror confirmed his diagnosis: eyes bloodshot, hair disheveled, in need of a shave. Terminal hangover. Still, well worth every ache of it.

He noticed a strand of auburn hair on the collar of his robe and gently removed it, automatically rolling it between his fingertips. Dynel. He frowned. There was no doubt. He could identify most of the synthetics by touch. It was Dynel. He placed it carefully on the counter in front of the mirror, but his gaze kept straying to it as he dressed. Dynel was used in elastic cables. He slipped out of the robe and hung it on a peg. And parachutes. He buttoned his shirt. High tensile stretch fabrics. He had difficulty but-

toning his cuffs. And wigs. He couldn't manage his tie. His hands were trembling, and his image in the mirror was blurred. He gave up, leaving it askew. He took out his wallet, and carefully counted out two hundred dollars.

He found the two women having coffee in an alcove next to the kitchen. They were shadow figures, silhouetted against the white linen draperies, dappled by the morning light. His doubts evaporated when he saw Nora seated at the table, the shape of her shoulders so terribly familiar.

"Your fee, ladies," he said, placing the money on the table. "It's less than we agreed on, but fair, I think, for the . . . service performed." Neither woman spoke. "Think of it as a penalty for confusing naiveté with stupidity."

"Harold—"

"Don't bother, Lilith. Don't. I'm sure you have an explanation. Whatever else you are, you're a master salesperson, and I know when I'm out of my league." His voice was shaking. He turned and walked out.

"A bit unsophisticated," Nora said, sipping her coffee.

"We needed the money." Lilith's tone was curt.

"Well," Nora said, "it would appear that we still do."

He wasn't sure how long he'd been driving. An hour, perhaps. The city was gradually coming to life. He bought fuel and cigarettes at an all night service station. The harsh bite of the unfamiliar smoke made him cough.

At seven forty-five he parked in a tow-away zone in front of the IDEX building and waited, scanning the faces in the stream of employees moving toward the doors. The building towered above its neighbors, a dark cylinder sheathed in smoked glass, gleaming as though carved from black onyx. A police cruiser approached slowly from the opposite direction. He watched it in the rear view mirror as it pulled into a parking lot to turn around.

And then he saw Michelle. She was wearing a conservative gray ensemble and running shoes, her hair rolled back in a primly efficient chignon. Drab as a sparrow, eyes squinting against the morning glare, she marched toward the building's entrance. He hesitated, struggling to reconcile his fantasy of the night before with this grimly capable soldier of commerce. The silent approach of the police car made his decision for him.

He slid out of his car and ran to intercept her.

He dodged through the pedestrians, only vaguely aware of the surprised glances from some of his co-workers.

"Michelle, wait. I've got to talk to you."

She looked up, startled. Her eyes widened in recognition, then in shock at his appearance. "What's wrong? What's happened to you?"

"Michelle, listen. I—"

"You're drunk!"

"No, I'm not, but—"

"You're either drunk or crazy and I don't care which." She tried to brush past him. He grabbed her shoulders.

"Listen to me!" The confrontation was attracting stares. She glanced down at his hands, then slowly up into his eyes. Her voice was low and unsteady, her fury barely under control.

"Take your hands off me you—creep! You're going to get us both fired. Don't you care?"

"Not really. I'm resigning today."

"What?"

"I'm going to go home, clean up, change clothes, and then I'm going to come back here and resign."

"But why? Your career—"

"Right. It is my career and since I'm good at it maybe I won't be unemployed for long. Now, will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"No! You must be out of your mind! You can't just—Harold, they're going to tow your car away."

He followed her gaze. A blue and white wrecker, beacons whirling, had parked in front of his Buick. They watched in silence as the operator hooked on, raised the car, and then edged back into traffic.

"Now what are you going to do?"

He shrugged. "Take a cab home, clean up, change clothes, and come back here and resign," he said steadily. "That's what I'm going to do. Now, what about dinner?"

"You can't be serious," she said, shaking her head slowly.

"I think that quitting my job is a very serious matter."

"But you don't know—look, we probably won't even like each other."

"I'm willing to risk that. So how about dinner?"

"No! It's too crazy. You're too crazy! Now let me alone. I'm going to work while I still have a job. If you want to quit, then quit! But don't blame it on me." She pushed past him. He made no move to stop her. It wouldn't have made any difference, and he knew it.

Gradually her stride faltered. Then she stopped. She turned and walked slowly back to him, her face clouded.

"Okay, Clark," she sighed, "okay. If you care enough to take that kind of risk, well, what the hell. But don't quit today. That's too much. Just call in sick. You probably are anyway. You can pick me up at seven, and ah, I guess we'd better go somewhere out of town."

"You called me Clark."

"Did I? Well, sorry. It's an 'in' joke."

"Yes," he said, "so I've heard. At seven, then?"

"All right, and listen, for what's at stake here, this dinner better be good, dammit."

"I think," he said slowly, "that it might turn out to be very expensive indeed."

"Good," she said, "I hope so. Now if it's not inconvenient for you, I'm going to work."

"See you tonight," he called, but she didn't look back.

He shoved his hands deep in his pockets, glancing around, noticing the people, the traffic, becoming aware of his surroundings. Somehow things seemed different. Foreign. He glimpsed his reflection in the dark glass wall of the IDEX building. It was small, and distorted. The traffic behind him seemed to flow and flex as it raced across the wall. "Xanadu," he said softly to himself, "welcome to Xanadu."

He shrugged and set off in search of a cab.

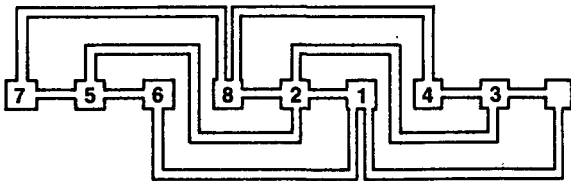
UNSOLVED

by
H. E. Dudeney

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July issue.

The Sergeant of the Law was "full rich of excellence. Discreet he was, and of great reverence." He was a very busy man, but, like many of us today, "he seemed busier than he was." He was talking one evening of prisons and prisoners, and at length made the following remarks: "And that which I have been saying doth forsooth call to my mind that this morn I bethought me of a riddle that I will now put forth." He then produced a slip of vellum, on which was drawn the curious plan that is now given. "Here," saith he, "be nine dungeons, with a prisoner in every dungeon save one; which is empty. These prisoners be numbered in order, 7, 5, 6, 8, 2, 1, 4, 3, and I desire to know how they can, in as few moves as possible, put themselves in the order 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. One prisoner may move at a time along the passage to the dungeon that doth happen to be empty, but never, on pain of death, may



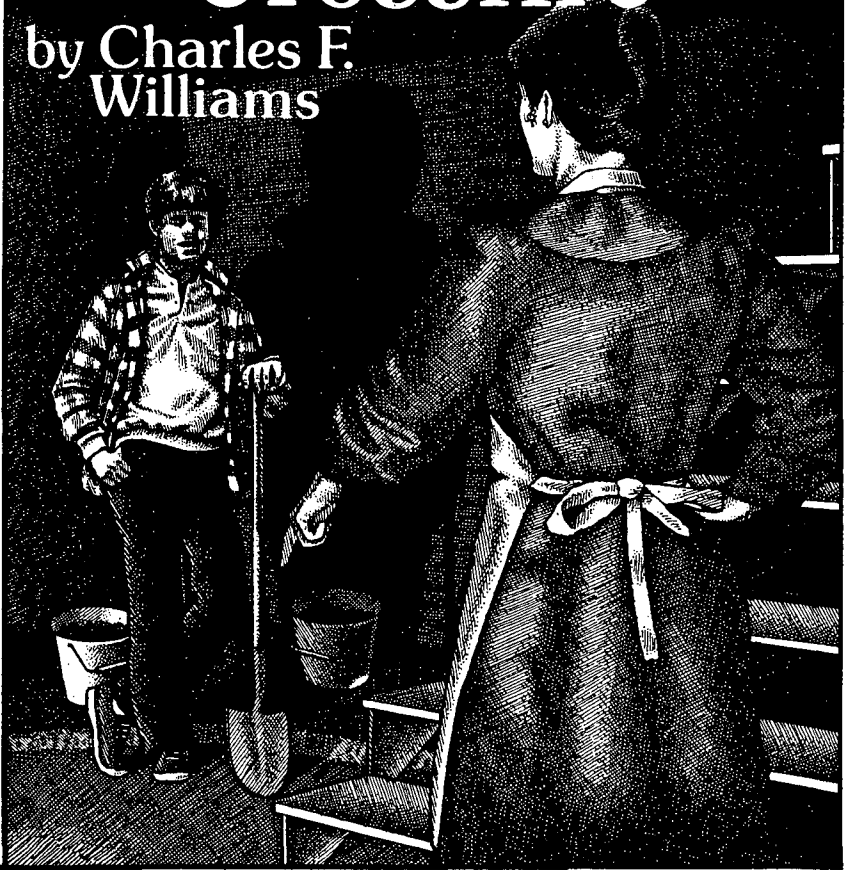
two men be in any dungeon at the same time. How may it be done?" If the reader makes a rough plan on a sheet of paper and uses numbered counters, he will find it an interesting pastime to arrange the prisoners in the fewest possible moves. As there is never more than one vacant dungeon at a time to be moved into, the moves may be recorded in this simple way: 3—2—1—6, and so on.

See page 148 for the solution to the May puzzle.

"The Man of Law's Puzzle," taken from The Canterbury Puzzles by H. E. Dudeney. Copyright © 1958 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

Crossfire

by Charles F.
Williams



Here's one I heard up in Mineral County. I was hung way up in Frostburg one night with bad brakes and a six-hour wait for the mechanic. The big bar there has picnic tables out on the sidewalk and that's where I was, watching the piggy-backs roll down Main Street. All those trucks were gearing down for the run down Martin's Mountain and I was thinking about all the money my rig and I weren't making.

Then these three Chessie trackmen settle in with me. They were from the Cumberland yards and at first they didn't have anything to talk about but union politics—like they really thought an argument could change a person's mind. But then they're on religion, somehow, and I joined in on that. We're all the time drinking and we would not shut up.

We got to talking about how we're all going to die, and how is it that you've maybe lived half of your life already. So I said yeah, and how come you can live ten thousand nights and only remember a dozen of them? We didn't answer that but we started talking about our nights: the first woman, the first baby. Watching your wife leave.

It was just bar talk because everybody just puts up with everybody else's talk so that they can get to talk about themselves again, but this one guy, Randy, told us a good one. This is what he had to say about how his most memorable night came to pass.

... In the summer of '60 I was what, fourteen? I was looking for work—and kids did not find work in Mineral County—so I flipped for this ad. Said, "*Job for Strong Young Man. See Lester Yoder*" at this address. Well, I three-speed over to check it out. Get into the long driveway of this fading farmhouse—worn bricks, quiet windows, all that kind of stuff. Weeds, bending under the weight of their own seed. A wild hedge that only the driveway pierced.

I leave my bike in the drive and wade up to the porch and knock on the door. No answer, so I walk around to the back, watching for snakes and who knows what in the weeds. I come around the corner and see a '57 Chevy up on blocks, and I see a pair of legs sticking out from under the front bumper. I can hear something cussing under there. So I come up and say, "Hey, Lester?" And a voice says, "Hey" back to me.

"Saw your ad in the paper," I say.

I'm thinking he didn't hear me, but then he says, "Good with a shovel?" I say I guess I am and then I stand there a long while, watching his boots wriggle. The heels leave dark lines in the dew.

I say, "Want me to hand you a screwdriver or something?" To let him know I'm still there.

He clinks and cusses some more and then he snakes out backwards and clasps his hands behind his neck. There's grease clinging to his right forearm. He's got a scraggly red beard and little red

eyes. He's got yellow teeth and he's got thin, greasy hair. He's a long, skinny man. I sit down in the weeds next to him and now my ass is getting wet.

"Well, want to dig in a cellar?" he asked.

"Sure," I say.

"Well, that's what the wife wants done," he says, and he never does say her name. "It's asinine," he says, "but it's all she talks about. It's asinine, but go ahead. Take eighteen inches of clay off my cellar floor. 'Get some headroom,' she says." You wouldn't believe the contempt in the man's voice. You knew he despised his wife.

"I'm paying forty dollars," he says.

Well, I go to shake on it and he stares at me as if he's never seen such a bizarre gesture in all his life.

He says, "There's a pick; there's a shovel. There's a wheelbarrow and buckets, all in the garage. Lantern, fuel's in the cellar. Put the clay over to the back end of the yard and spread it out." And he wriggles back under the car.

I say, "Guess I'll get started." And I do.

The cellar windows are bricked up, and away from the foot of the stairs I have to rely on the lantern. It's just six-seven-eight. Six shovels to fill the pair of buckets, and seven steps to the wheelbarrow outside. Eight buckets to fill the wheelbarrow that I push through the yard to dump, trailblazing through the weeds.

The next day I'm back down there, and it's almost dusk, and there's this corkscrew winding its way through my lower back, you know? So I go over to where I can stand up straight, and I lean on my shovel. And then what always happens when you lean on your shovel happened: the boss loomed near.

"Dig it deeper," she says. "I want it deeper."

I turned around fast and I figure it must be Lester's wife. And she's looking wasted. Her eyes are the shellshocked kind you see in combat photos. They stare past you so that you want to look over your shoulder to see what they see, and then again that's the last thing you want to do.

Every day that week I never hear her coming. And that's all she ever says: Dig it deeper. Meanwhile it all gets on my nerves—the shadows my body throws on the cellar walls, the white noise of the Coleman lantern. But I stick with it. And one day there's six and a half feet from floor to ceiling throughout the cellar, and I sit down to admire it.

Then it occurs to me that Lester's wife—she's so quiet—she could have slipped into the cellar behind me. I figure she could be hiding under the stairs, waiting to grab my ankles through the open slats in the stairs when I pass over her. It's dark under the stairs and it just gets to me; I don't know why.

So I haul it on home, take a shower. And when I step out the phone's ringing. It's Edgar, a fat friend of mine.

"He's alive," Edgar says to me.

"Don't jump to conclusions," I say back. I'm tired and I'm weirded out.

"He speaks," Edgar says. "Come camping with me and Dennis. Come on over."

"Sounds good," I say, although it doesn't. But I hadn't seen anybody the whole week I was working at Lester's, and you have to touch base with your pals.

So I leave a note for my parents to find whenever they get home from work, and I look for my wallet and realize that I must have left it in the cellar. I used to take it out of my jeans when I was working down there because you know how it bothers you when you're sweaty and bending over all the time. It only had a couple of bucks in it but now I couldn't chip in for the beer. Well, I get my sleeping bag balanced over my shoulder and I ride over to Edgar's.

We shoot baskets at his garage hoop until the sun goes down and then we head for the wilds of Deerfield Cemetery. And we head for a spot behind a row of monuments that's out of sight of the gate. I always told my folks that we camped in a field behind Edgar's house, but this was our traditional campsite. And, man, walking through that cemetery on a windy night—there's corpses under your feet and black branches over your head.

Dennis is already there. He's got a stack of freshly warmed six-packs and we right away get into that. When we're mostly through it I tell all about my summer job, and I allow that it gave me the creeps. And I admit that I haven't been paid yet. And I let out that what money I have is in my wallet, which is down in that cellar.

And when I'm done, Dennis is squatting on his heels, pulling the end of a stick out of the fire we got going there. He gives the stick a little wave to get the tip going, and then he lights his cigarette the way the guys on the Camel billboards do.

"Dig it deeper," he says in this mocking voice. "I want it deeper." Then he starts into pointing that stick at my nose, saying, "You're a mooch, Randy. You're mooching."

After a couple of minutes of this I start to take offense. I say, "You want beer money? Then come with me to that cellar right now, 'cause that's where it is."

So Dennis tosses his stick into the fire, and he clips his flashlight onto his belt, and he says, "Why not?" So we head out.

And when we get to the railroad cut we pause at the top of the embankment and I get that "I'll always remember how this looks" feeling you sometimes get. Edgar, he's panting already and down on his knee at the edge of the embankment. He's tying his shoes for the hundredth time that day. Dennis, he's standing with his legs far apart, his arms folded across his chest. He's got his fists tucked into opposite armpits to force the old biceps out, and he's looking at the shiny rails and moonlit gravel below.

I almost had second thoughts there. I was at the part where you go, "Well . . . I *guess* this is going to be some kind of fun." But just then Dennis steps behind Edgar and shoves him, and when there isn't anyplace left to roll Edgar finds his feet and starts yelling vile names up at us. Dennis runs down whooping and I follow, and I never quite get through that second-thought stage.

So Dennis ("I'll take the point") leads us in and out of the woods to take Lester's house from the rear. Every once in a while he'll freeze, drop to one knee, and release a flurry of hand signals that Edgar always takes to mean "Hit the deck." Now, you can cover that yard in two minutes' walking, but it takes forever to do it like commandos, which is how we're doing it. But finally Dennis mouths something over his shoulder; gives the "Follow me, men" sign and starts to book. We all dash up to the cellar door and gather around it to study the situation.

"All right," Dennis whispers. "Edgar, you're the lookout. Stand under that window. Hear any sound—anything at all—make like an owl. Got it?"

Edgar tiptoes under the window, doing his goofy grin. He gestures for us to hurry; starts shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He's ready to bail out. I pull up on the cellar door and strain to keep it from banging on the downswing. Sure it creaked.

Old Dennis smiles, hands me the flashlight. Gives me the thumbs up.

"After you," he says.

I snap the light and take two very slow steps down the stairs. And I turn around and I look up at Dennis.

"No funny stuff," I say.

Dennis shakes his head.

"I mean it," I say.

Dennis nods. So I take a deep breath and go on down. Got one foot on the floor when the door thumps shut behind me. And I'm standing there, stock still, listening to Edgar saying, "Hell you doing? Leave him in there?" Then I hear Dennis' voice but not his words. I hear something being scraped into the padlock clasp and I creep back up the stairs.

"Dennis," I whisper. "Open up."

He says, "Sweet dreams, Randy."

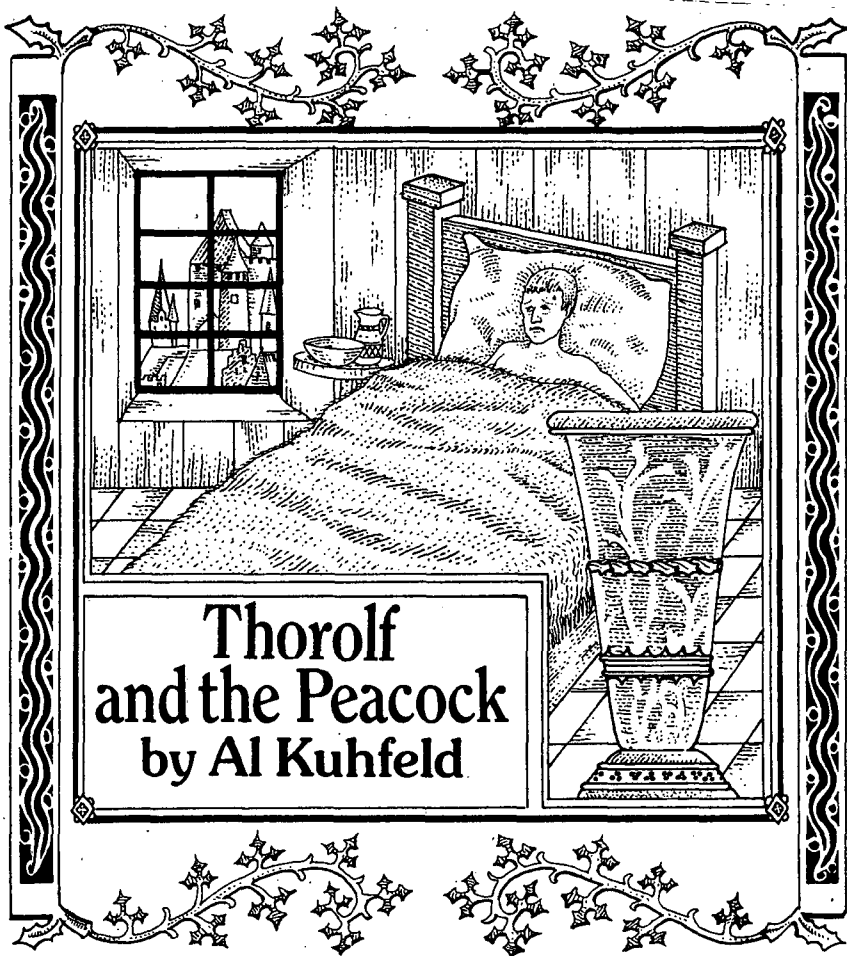
I push up on the door. It moves a fraction and then the outside clasp takes hold; Dennis, you son of a bitch. But I very deliberately decide not to get too bummed, right? I figure after I find my wallet I'll stretch out and get some sleep; I might be drunk enough.

So I go back down, and something moves, and I jerk the light back and see Lester's wife just barely twisting—to the left, to the right. I mean I see her hanging by the neck in the dead center of that cellar and I see, by the bare inch of darkness between her toes and the floor, that I had dug just barely deep enough.

Now you know you stare at anything long enough it will look ridiculous. And after five hours down there my sides hurt from laughing; I was gasping for air. And every time I'd started to get it together, something else about what I was seeing cracked me up again. Her expression was like, "You think this is good? Keep staring. You ain't seen nothing yet."

So I guess I remember just about everything about that night. The flashlight went out, eventually. They let me out in the morning.

... Well, that was Randy's story. I for one don't doubt that it happened pretty much the way he said, because when a husband and wife go to war it's total war. You're going to get some civilian casualties. And it seems to me that this world is full to bursting with the walking wounded, and it seems to me that a lot of them—maybe most—just got caught in the crossfire, like Randy did.



Thorolf and the Peacock

by Al Kuhfeld

When Thorolf Pike was outlawed from Surtshheim District because of some killings, he decided he would go live among the English. A number of his supporters were outlawed along

with him. They loaded all their valuables onto Thorolf's knorr and sailed away in a great hurry, before their enemies could combine and come at them.

There were fourteen of them, all bachelors like the Jomsvik-

ings, and the ship could have been very crowded. However, most had suspected that the judgment of the Althing would go against them, and they'd sold many of their possessions. They wore lots of silver, and had more in their chests; otherwise, they traveled light.

They made port at North-landing, a border town where the people were a mix of English and Welsh. Thorolf had traded there before, and knew quite a few of the merchants. He had a handsome assortment of furs on board, and sold them for a good profit.

They pooled their riches, with Thorolf providing the lion's share, and bought a strong warehouse with a greathall upstairs, and outbuildings in a fenced-in yard. It was in the heart of the merchant district, near the road down the bluffs to the docks. Then they all went to the cathedral and got themselves primsigned so good Christians could trade more comfortably with them.

The bishop apparently expected more from this polite fiction than most churchmen, and was grievously offended when Thorolf and the others failed to attend services. This disfavor in high places made some of the locals uncomfortable. Others set more store by the quality of Thorolf's wares.

Thorolf was a good business-

man and a formidable bargainer; and one of his men, Otkel, was as sly as the King of the Foxes. By making lots of advantageous deals—aided by the threat implicit in his exile for killings—Thorolf was soon on his way to becoming one of the richest merchants in the town.

Though he took on some English manners, Thorolf kept many Norse ways: he was very hospitable, and gave rich presents to his friends and supporters. Many merchants guested in Thorolf's hall; ate and drank freely and emerged wearing gifts of silver. They often had been skinned in trade—but that was business, which Thorolf kept strictly apart from hospitality.

One morning Thorolf and his men were riding along the bluffs when they saw a ship putting in to the docks below. It was brightly painted and the sails were gaily dyed; banners flew from the masthead.

"That's a handsome ship," Thorolf said. "And it looks like it would carry cargo well. I wonder who owns it."

"The banners belong to Jonathan Draper," said Leif, who'd learned something of heraldry. "He makes clothing for wealthy nobles and merchants. He travels about, gathering up fabrics and furs and fashions, and gossip. He's a favorite of the court

and extremely rich, and folk say he thinks himself one of the most important people beneath Heaven."

"That's a common enough sentiment," Thorolf said. "With his connections at court, it'd help our standing here no end if he stayed with us, and we might do business with him. There's fine ermine in our warehouse, and beaver and marten. Leif, go down there and offer him our hospitality."

By the time Leif made his way down the zigzag bluff road, the crew had begun to unload the ship. They were putting up an enormous pavilion tent in bright stripes of blue and yellow, in a nearby field reserved for such uses. Jonathan Draper stood watching, surrounded by six armed men.

Jonathan himself was slight of build, with a dissipated face and a tailor's stoop. He wore a riding houpelande of midnight blue strewn with embroidered flowers in gold. His shoes had points a foot long, held up by fine golden chains rising to garters of Morocco leather at his knees. The bodyguards were clothed in black silk and leather; they wore polished helmets, and shirts of silvered mail. Leif was dressed prosperously, but suddenly felt shabby by comparison.

He dismounted, and inclined his head courteously. "Have I

the honor of addressing Jonathan Draper?" he said.

The magnificent apparition looked at Leif and sniffed. "You do have that honor," he agreed.

"Well then," Leif continued, "Thorolf Pike invites you to be a guest in his greathall, you and your men. Thorolf is one of the richest merchants in Northland, and his halls are much more comfortable than a tent this close to the water. We've fine furs in the warehouse beneath, which a man of your discrimination will surely want to examine at leisure."

"I know of Thorolf, and his furs," Jonathan said. "I'll be glad to see the furs in the marketplace. But why in the world should I want to share a large and smoky room with a killer barbarian who's been cast out even by the other barbarians? My fine pavilion will be more comfortable." He turned to shout instructions at his overseer, supervising the erection of the tent. It really was a beautiful tent.

Leif's face turned red as his beard. He reached for his sword, but the six guards closed ranks about Jonathan. Leif hooked his thumb in his belt as if that were what he intended to do all along. The guards snickered, hands on their sword-hilts, as Leif remounted and rode away.

As he left, he saw Brother Maynard, the bishop's chief

clerk, heading towards the campgrounds.

Leif explained all this to Thorolf, who swore by Odin and Thor that the clothier would regret his words. "But maybe the best god of all for this revenge is Loki," he said. "Otkel, find that man's weak spot."

Otkel smiled crookedly, and left.

He returned late that evening. Most of the men had made up their beds and were getting ready for sleep when they heard a crash downstairs, and the door slammed. Slow, uneven steps came up the stairs, and Otkel staggered into the room. He was drunk as a lord, and grinning. He collapsed, one joint folding at a time, onto a heap of furs.

"Got'm!" he said as Thorolf came out of his room and hurried over. "Got one of his cooks drunk, 'n' how he did talk!

"He's almost out of absinthe. He gets *awful* mean when he runs out. An' we c'ntrol th'only merchant in town what sells the stuff!" Otkel lay back.

"Absinthe—" Thorolf said to himself. "Drink enough of that, and it'll rot your mind. No wonder he's so unpleasant."

Otkel lifted his head. "Oh, som'thn else. Bishop's man came with invite, and Jon'thn sent *him* packing too!" His head fell back on the furs, and he began to snore.

Thorolf laughed, it was so strange to find himself and the bishop cast adrift on the same seas.

Two men dressed in black, with polished armor, came trotting down the road and stopped to speak with an unkempt peasant lounging nearby.

"Where can we find the best doctor in Northland?" one of them asked. "Our master has been taken suddenly ill."

The peasant scrambled to his feet. "If you be in a hurry, this be the shortest way." He set off down a barely visible side trail. The two guards followed.

As they were going through a patch of thick bushes, half a dozen ruffians leaped on the guards. A few swift blows and they were unconscious; the peasants began to strip them. A length of rope, some sailors' knots, and the naked men were trussed up like geese and rolled into the bushes.

Soon a sedan chair, carried by four men in livery, arrived at the pavilion. A mounted man in a more elaborate version of the livery called out. "Hello! Is this the camp of Jonathan Draper?"

A servant came out. "It is, but he's dreadfully ill, sir."

"Why, yes, that's why my master, the physician Jeremiah, sent me. Tell me, did he

start sweating first? Was this—followed by vomiting, and stomach cramps?”

“Why, yes, m’lord. He’d just had lunch and was complaining about the quality of the local absinthe when it started just as you say.”

“Then there’s no time to waste. He’s got the green-sickness and needs sweating and fumigation. My master is having the steam bath prepared at this very moment. Bring your master out—we brought a sedan chair for him.”

Two servants half-carried the clothier out of the pavilion. His hair was damp and plastered to his head; his skin was pale, and he moaned. He’d soiled his houppebande. The servants lifted him into the chair, and he flopped back against the cushions.

The bearers adjusted the weight on their shoulders and started up the road at a trot. The guards came along, two on either side of the chair, and the rider followed.

As they were going among some isolated bushes, one of the bearers stumbled. The chair lurched and swayed and the clothier moaned and retched as he held on for dear life. The guards swiftly reached for the chair to save their master from a fall; and as they were occupied, a band of peasants leaped on them and overpowered them

before they could draw their weapons.

Truncheons flew, and the guards and the merchant fell unconscious. They were stripped and tied up; their goods and clothing were loaded into the chair. One of the peasants tried to get in the chair with the goods; but the bearers tilted him out onto the ground. The bunch of them laughed heartily and carried the chair and its load off.

Thorolf Pike and six others were going down to the docks with a wagon full of cloth when they saw several men lying on the ground beside the trail, naked and all tied up. A couple were writhing about, furiously cursing as they tried to undo their bonds; two were unconscious. The fifth was sick and moaning; he scarcely fought the ropes at all.

“What’s this?” Thorolf said. “Untie them!” He himself went towards the sick man, knife in hand, and cut away his bonds. “What’s happened?” he asked.

One of the guards spluttered out a story about peasants and robbers, and their master being ill. Thorolf stood, lifting the sick man like a feather. They quickly rearranged the cloth in the wagon, making it into an impromptu bed. They lifted the men in, and covered them over.

"Let's get these men back to the greathall. Leif, ride ahead and fetch a doctor for them."

One of the guards raised his head. "There are two more of us," he said. "I don't know where. The robbers may have gotten them too."

Thorolf detailed two of his men to search for the other guards. They drove the wagon ahead until they reached a wide spot in the road, and turned it around; then they headed for their hall as rapidly as they could.

Servants gathered about and carried the men inside. They quickly laid out bolsters in the greathall and covered the invalids with warm furs to rest. Thorolf took the merchant into his own room and put him down on his own bed of precious white bear-furs from the land of the Finns. He set a silver basin by the man's head, just in case, and brought him soothing herbal wines until the doctor could arrive.

The doctor gave the clothier a tincture of poppy to make him sleepy, then spread unguents on the bruises and abrasions of the guards. "They should be fine, with a good night's rest," he said. Then Thorolf's men brought in the remaining two guards and the doctor ministered to them also before he left. Soon all were resting comfortably.

Thorolf slept that night in the greathall with his men and with the merchant's guards. He was up early, making sure the cook prepared a good meal for his guests; and he took broth and bread into the merchant with his own hands.

After Jonathan had eaten, Thorolf said, "We found you and your men naked and I can't have that. I want you to take your pick of my finest clothing." He went to his chest and held up his best clothes for the merchant's inspection. None of them was of the silk Jonathan loved, but they were woven from soft wool of excellent quality. There were decorative bands at the neck and hem and sleeves, brightly colored animals with long legs and necks intertwined in intricate knotwork.

Jonathan was a master of his craft. He could recognize these as fine work, even in a style he didn't favor. He picked a cream tunic with red animals outlined in couched gold thread, and bright yellow breeches. Thorolf gave him a red belt and boots to go with it, and a pouch with a dagger in a worked-in scabbard. When he was dressed, Jonathan suddenly realized he felt fine, without a trace of illness.

"You've had a hard time of it," Thorolf said to him. "Tomorrow is soon enough for you to get back to your work. You

should rest in our solar. It's on the south end of the greathall."

They went together into the hall, and Jonathan was surprised to see his men up and dressed. They were all wearing white linens, with embroidered stags in black. They had black breeches and boots and a black belt. The captain of his guard was going through an intricate sword-drill, while everybody watched from a safe distance. The blade flickered and gleamed in the morning light coming through a window.

"My lord!" he called out when he recognized Jonathan in the strange clothing. "Look how they've outfitted us! They've given me a very good sword, and the men too!" His sword danced into a salute, and he bowed to Jonathan and Thorolf, who were standing together.

"Maybe these swords will serve you better than the ones I bought you," Jonathan said sourly. His memory of the previous day was coming back. "Get down to the pavilion, and see what's happening there."

Thorolf and Jonathan were in the solar, swapping tales of unusual merchant ventures, when the captain returned. "Terrible news, m'lord!" he said. "I talked with the other encampment in the Merchants' Field, and they said we guards had been there about sundown to break camp. The bandits

must have taken our clothing so they could impersonate us.

"Then the servants returned, saying the doctor's man had come back an hour or so after you left and told them you would be gone overnight. They said you and the doctor sent instructions to spend the night on the ship because with green-sickness in camp it wouldn't be safe to sleep close to the ground. They were as surprised as we were to find everything gone.

"But at least all our merchandise is safe on board, and we're all alive." He bowed his head.

Before the merchant could erupt, Thorolf broke in. "That's terrible! You must stay here until we can work this out." And Jonathan contented himself with sending one of Thorolf's men up to the castle to notify the bailiff of the theft.

Thorolf held a great feast that night in Jonathan Draper's honor, and many merchants attended it. There was rich food in plenty; there were musicians and jongleurs and ale. Jonathan was very full and quite merry when he sank into his bed of furs that night.

The next day, after breakfast, Thorolf took Jonathan into the solar. "I'm afraid the word isn't very good," he said. "The bailiff hasn't found a trace of your property, nor of the thieves. And I had a messenger at day-

break; a dozen of my relatives are going to be in town tomorrow and expect to guest with me. They're my relatives—I can't refuse—but they're not the sort of Northmen a man of your refinement would find companionable."

"That is unsettling. You've been a wonderful host; I can't find words enough to thank you. But my pavilion is gone and my ship is crowded. Where can I stay?"

"Well, I have a very good pavilion in my warehouse," Thorolf said. "As merchants, we should be able to come to some sort of accommodation."

They set to bargaining furiously. Thorolf had the upper hand and the deal was very expensive for Jonathan. Eventually they reached an agreement, and Thorolf had the pavilion loaded onto a wagon, with several more wagons to bring back the merchandise in trade.

As Jonathan and his men were preparing to leave, Thorolf snapped his fingers and one of his men came forward with a wooden chest. Thorolf opened it, and said, "Your visit didn't start under the best auspices, but despite that, I wouldn't want you to feel you've been slighted in any way. Among Northmen, it's the custom to gift honored guests as they are leaving." And he gave a silver ring to each of the guards, and

personally put a silver torc around Jonathan's neck.

"Think of me, when you wear this," Thorolf said. The drover cracked his whip and the little caravan got under way. After a while, the wagons returned with a rich load of merchandise.

They'd no sooner gotten everything into the warehouse and the gates closed when Jonathan Draper came storming up the street at the head of his men, their swords drawn. All the neighbors slammed their doors and barred their shutters.

Jonathan beat on the door to the warehouse with ineffectual fists. "Come out! Come out, you pirate!" he bawled. His men brandished their swords.

Thorolf opened the shutters on his second-floor window and leaned out. "Eh, Jonathan? Back so soon?" He smiled benignly.

"You sold me my own tent! You had it dyed green so I wouldn't recognize it, and you sold me my own tent! I knew it as soon as it was pitched!"

"I suppose I had new fittings made, so you wouldn't recognize the ironwork while you were examining the merchandise?" Thorolf waved his hand in dismissal. "I got the tent from a circus—isn't that strange? But there you have it. I got that tent from a clown. He certainly wasn't a master merchant like you, to judge by the bargain he drove."

And then Thorolf's men all took turns looking down at the peacock and his crew, in the Northern finery they'd been given, until the peacock's guards realized they were well outnumbered and quietly urged their master to leave. One of Thorolf's men mussed his hair and leaned out of the window to point, saying, "If you be going to the docks, that be the shortest way" in a coarse voice.

Jonathan went straight to the baron, of course, and swore out a great thundering complaint against Thorolf and his men for assault and theft and swindle. But they didn't have any really solid evidence. The only witness they could think of was the town dyer, and he and his workers had left on a sudden trip to buy cochineal.

When he was summoned to answer the complaint, Thorolf pointed out that he'd treated Jonathan and his guards very well, as anybody could see by looking at their clothes and as many prominent locals who'd been at the feast could testify. Furthermore, Jonathan's men had been milling about his residence waving swords and frightening the neighbors. Thorolf wasn't at all sure but what he should swear out a complaint over *that*.

Several good friends of the baron had been hurt by court gossip started by Jonathan Draper, so he was already inclined against the man. When the bishop came and swore that he knew exactly the clown Thorolf meant, the baron sent Jonathan packing.

On the voyage home, he eased his sorrows with absinthe, but immediately had a terrible attack of green-sickness. That was when he realized the wine-seller might have had something to do with his troubles—but of course by then it was far too late to reopen the complaint with a new witness.

Leif stood in the cool shadows of the cathedral, talking with Brother Maynard.

"Thorolf would like it very much if you and the bishop could come to a feast in our greathall soon."

"What?" said the Brother. "Eat in a smoky room with a killer barbarian?"

"It's really not a bad idea. Look what happened to the last person who refused the opportunity. We'll even let the bishop bless the occasion."

And the two men leaned on each other's shoulders and shook with laughter.



FICTION

Motion Sickness

by Taylor McCafferty

THOMPSON/87

It was a week ago today that Jesse made headlines. Just a week ago, and yet it seems as if it's been years. Long, dark years since his story was all over the front pages of the Pigeon Fork Gazette. Of course in a town the size of Pigeon Fork there's not a whole lot to compete with a story like Jesse's. Around these parts not too many people get themselves killed. I

guess that's headline stuff, all right.

Once, when I was little, I thought I'd make some headlines of my own. I thought I'd waltz into the *Gazette* wearing my best Sunday dress, show them what I could do, and find myself on the front page the next day.

Now, of course, I'll never be able to tell anybody about it.

Not after what happened with Jesse and all. I'm not hankering to spend any time behind bars. And if anybody even suspected, they might put two and two together, and figure out what I did.

I found out I could do it when I was nine. It was on a Sunday, almost fifteen years ago today, right after the whole family got back from church. I used to think that finding out about it on a Sunday was pretty significant. Like maybe it was a gift from God or something. Now, after Jesse, I don't think that way any more.

That Sunday Mama, Pa, my two brothers, Zeke and Parnell, and I had just sat down to dinner. It's funny but even after all these years I can still remember every single thing on the table. Corn on the cob, green beans, fried chicken with brown gravy, cornbread, mashed potatoes, pecan pie, and iced tea. The autumn sun was slanting across the table, so I'd moved my chair a little closer to Mama to get the sun out of my eyes.

Mama and Pa were having a little argument about what to do with the tobacco money. It was the same argument they had every year after the crop was sold.

"Now, Henry, you know I had my heart set on getting me a deep freeze, you know I did." Mama's voice was doing that

whine it always did when things weren't going her way.

Pa's voice was wheedling. "But, Margie, you know we need the tractor rehailed. And new fencing."

"But that deep freeze sure would come in handy."

It went on that way for a while until Mama finally said, throwing up her hands, "Well, I just wish we had a sign from the Lord. Just a sign to tell us what to do." Mama was always asking for signs back then. You'd think after going to church twice on Sunday, and to prayer meeting every Wednesday night, that she would have heard from the Lord enough. But evidently, three times a week didn't satisfy her.

"Just a sign," Mama said one more time while Pa rolled his eyes. That's when I thought it would be real funny if the ice out of Mama's glass would pop out on the table right then and there. To cast God's vote for the freezer. I thought it, smiling to myself a little.

And it happened.

An ice cube landed right next to Mama's glass. Everybody at the table, including me, just stared at that ice cube for a second. Mama's eyes were showing the whites all around. Then everybody started talking at once. "Why, did you see that?" "Did you?" "That cube just jumped out all by itself!"

Pa looked suspiciously at Parnell and Zeke. "Did either of you boys kick this here table?" They both said no, so Pa turned to me. "Nadine, did you jiggle this table, or something like that?" I shook my head, but Pa turned back to Mama anyway and said, "That's what it was, Margie. One of them kids shook the table. That's all."

I remember feeling relieved. Pa was right, of course. It wasn't me doing it. Not really. I just happened to be thinking about that ice cube when the table got shook. Surely that explained it.

"I never felt the table shake," Mama said weakly. She actually looked a little disappointed. So I looked back over at her glass. Just to see if it could possibly happen again. I pictured in my mind another ice cube popping out, just like before.

And there it went. Rattling onto the top of the table.

My heart started jumping as fast as those ice cubes. And Mama went down on her knees and started praying. Pa looked annoyed by the whole thing, but he also looked something else. Scared. My big, brave Pa was actually scared. So were Parnell and Zeke. I almost laughed out loud at how frightened my big strapping brothers looked. Of ice cubes.

I could hardly wait to get done with that dinner and go to

my room. To see if I could move anything else. When everything finally calmed down some, I excused myself and almost ran out of the dining room. In my bedroom, I found out that, sure enough, I could move anything I wanted to. And if I really concentrated, I could bend stuff. Like that little metal ruler I had for school.

I started to go back and tell Mama and Papa right away, but I could hear all of them still out there in the dining room, marveling over Mama's "sign from the Lord." I was pretty sure if I told, I'd get spanked. For scaring people. Or maybe for making fun of God. Or something like that. If she had to, Mama would make something up to punish me because she'd be so mad she wasn't going to get her freezer. So I decided to keep my mouth shut.

Right after that Mama did get that freezer. And for a while there, Mama got quite a few signs from the Lord. I couldn't help it. It was so funny to see her turn white, and start saying "Hallelujah, Hallelujah" every time I shut a door, or rattled a pan, or made a vase fall over.

It took Mama almost a year, but eventually she caught on that she never got her heavenly signs unless I was in the room. One day right after "God" had turned the radio on and off a

couple of times, Mama just came right out and asked me. She was looking at me so funny, sort of scared-like, that I got flustered. Before I knew it, I'd blurted out the whole thing.

By that time I was almost eleven, and I'd looked it up in the library at school. "It's called psychokinesis, Mama," I told her. "It's moving things with your mind." I tried to explain it all to her, but Mama had stopped listening after the psycho part.

"I won't have a psycho in my house," she said, her voice going shrill. "Now, Nadine, you promise me. I don't want you ever doing this again. I mean it. Never. Never. Never."

"But, Mama," I said, "I think I could be famous. I could make a lot of money showing people what I can do."

Mama went white. "Oh, Lordy, Lordy," she wailed. Then she went on and on about what an awful thing it was, and how the neighbors would talk, and how people might even come and take me away. To study me, like some human guinea pig. "It just ain't natural, Nadine," she said. "It—it's heathen!" Mama actually acted as if it were an *evil* thing to do.

I felt as if I'd been caught doing something nasty in the bathroom. So I promised, my face red with shame. Mama also made me promise not to

tell anybody—what I could do. Not even Pa, or my brothers.

After that, Mama never mentioned it again. It was almost like we'd never talked about it, except every once in a while I'd catch her looking at me funny. Like maybe she was afraid. I never could figure out if she was afraid *for* me, or afraid *of* me.

I tried, I really did, to keep those promises. But moving things with my mind had become as natural for me as breathing. And it's real hard to give up breathing. Particularly when it seems like the right thing to do.

Like that time I was looking out the kitchen window and Parnell and Zeke were playing touch football in the back yard. I could see real clear that Parnell was about to fall smack over a piece of wood lying out there. It wasn't anything to give that wood a little push to one side.

Or that time in art class when Lu Mae Wilson was making fun of everybody. Saying how everybody else's watercolor looked real amateur compared to hers. And going on about what a bunch of hicks the rest of us were.

Lu Mae was one of the richest girls in school, on account of her dad owning the sawmill; and she was always going on and on about how much better she was

than everybody else. How much smarter, and prettier, and more talented.

That day in art class it seemed like real justice for her watercolor paint to suddenly dump all over her paper. I'll never forget how everybody laughed and hooted. And I'll never forget the expression on Lu Mae's face while that watercolor dissolved right in front of her eyes. Lu Mae went scarlet, and began screaming curse words. She even threw her paintbrush clear across the room.

I reckon there are a lot of things I'll never forget. Like the first time I saw Jesse Samuels.

It was a few months after I'd graduated from high school. I'd gotten myself a job at Chism's Dress Shop in town, and that day I was working by myself, putting some purses on display in the window. I'd just straightened their price tags when I looked up and saw Jesse standing there, wearing faded denims and an "I don't care" smile. He winked at me, and his grin grew even wider. I must've gone every shade of the rainbow before I turned away. I almost ran to the back of the store.

Jesse was, bar none, the best looking man I'd ever seen. To be honest, though, I hadn't seen too many. At least, not close up. I never did date much. That summer it seemed as if everybody but me had gone off and

gotten married. Even Parnell and Zeke had gotten themselves hitched, and yet I was still living at home. Waiting.

I guess I'm not what you'd call pretty. My face looks like it's been dipped in bleach and everything's gone pale. Pale brown hair, pale brown eyes, real pale complexion. Even my eyelashes are pale, and Mama wouldn't let me wear mascara. Back then I was sure that God had given me psychokinesis to make up for Him being real stingy with looks.

With Jesse, though, God had had a field day. Jesse was tall and dark and had muscles that threatened to split the seams of his clothes. When he sauntered into the dress shop that day, I could feel my face getting hot just looking at him. He had eyes so blue you felt as if you could jump right in and swim. I must've been swimming around in those eyes for several seconds before I managed to say, "May I help you?"

"You sure can," Jesse said. "I'm looking for a pretty dress. For a girl about your size."

My heart sank. Because, of course, that meant he had a girlfriend. Even as I thought such a thing, I could feel my face growing even hotter. Because, really, did I expect a man who looked like that to ever be interested in a girl who looked like me?

We must've looked at every dress in my size, until finally Jesse decided on a real pretty blue one. He paid for it, then handed it to me. "It's for you, little lady," he said, grinning at me. "Because you've got the prettiest eyes I've ever seen."

I think that's why I loved Jesse right from the start. He always seemed to see something in me that I didn't see myself. That day I actually felt a little dizzy. "Oh, now, I couldn't," I said. "Really, I don't even know you!" I was so flustered my voice shook.

Jesse's voice, though, was as smooth as syrup. "I'm Jesse Samuels," he said, "and I got into town a week ago. Just picked up my first paycheck at the sawmill." He grinned. "Now you know me. And I definitely think we should get to know each other better."

In the end I took that dress. It's still hanging in my closet, a little faded now but still pretty. Jesse and I started dating that very day; and like he said, we got to know each other better. Eventually, we got to know each other in the biblical sense. Oh, I knew it wasn't right, us not being married and all; but I was so all-fired happy that Jesse wanted *me*, it just didn't occur to me to say no.

It wasn't long before I also got to know all of Jesse's secret dreams and ambitions. His

dreams, I guess, were pretty simple. Jesse plain wanted to be rich. "I've watched my pa struggle all his life and I'm not going to have a life like his. Nosirree," he told me. Jesse was working toward being made a manager at the sawmill, and after that he wanted to buy into the place, become a part-owner. "We're going to have a wonderful life, Nadine," Jesse told me.

Back then, lying in Jesse's arms, it was so easy to believe that. We even knew when we'd get married. Right after Jesse was made manager. "When my future is a little more secure, Nadine. Then we'll start us a family."

When Jesse first started talking about all his secrets, I wanted real bad to tell him mine. To be as open with him as he seemed to be with me. But I was afraid it might change the way he felt about me if he knew what I could do.

Jesse and I had been dating a year and a half before I finally got up enough courage to tell him. Even now I'm not sure why I did such a stupid thing. It wouldn't have been so bad to have just one little secret. And maybe none of it would've happened if I hadn't told.

But no, I had to tell him. It was on a Saturday night right after I moved into my own apartment. The same apartment I have today. I'd decided

to move away from home so Jesse and I could spend more time together. And yes, I admit it, I was real anxious to get away from Mama's disapproving looks every time Jesse came over. She was all for us getting married right away. Whether Jesse was financially secure or not.

That Saturday night we were watching television in my apartment when one of them specials came on. It was all about this Uri Geller guy who could do the same things I could do. My throat went dry, listening to that TV going on about how Uri Geller could bend keys and stuff like that. Jesse, however, thought it was a hoot. "That's great," he said. "Imagine being able to do things like that."

I swallowed real quick, and said, "I don't have to *imagine* it, Jesse."

Jesse just looked at me real blank for a minute like he wasn't sure he'd heard me right. So I showed him. I moved an ash-tray on the coffee table in front of us. I had to move it a couple of times before Jesse believed it was really me doing it.

Then he laughed and slapped his knee like it was the funniest joke he'd ever heard. I remember how relieved I suddenly felt.

Jesse's face changed, though, right away. He got real serious.

"Why, Nadine, you know what this means?"

I shook my head, smiling.

"Nadine, we're going to be rich." Jesse's eyes were dancing with excitement. "You'll make a fortune, doing this for people! You could be on TV like Uri Geller, tour the country—"

I interrupted him. "Oh, no, I couldn't, Jesse. It would kill Mama." Mama had a bad heart by then, and I knew without even thinking about it that if she ever found out I was moving stuff in public Mama would drop over dead.

Jesse looked at me like he hadn't heard me right. "But, Nadine, we could be rich. *Rich*."

"Jesse, money isn't everything," I said.

"Nope. Money just *buys* everything!" Jesse got up from the couch and started pacing. "I can't believe you've got a chance to make us rich, and you won't take it."

It was the first argument we ever had. I tried to explain about my promise to Mama, tried to make Jesse understand what it would surely do to her. But Jesse wouldn't listen. He just said over and over, "If you really loved me, you'd do this. With the kind of money you'd make, we could get married right away. We'd have the life we always dreamed about."

"Jesse," I finally said, "I can't. Ever."

He stomped out that night, slamming the door behind him. I must've cried the whole night. And every other night for a week until Jesse finally phoned. "I love you, Nadine," he said. "I really do." I thought I might actually faint.

That night, in Jesse's arms again, I wanted to shout with joy. "You make me feel seven feet tall," Jesse said, kissing me. Then he added, "If only we could be married now. If only we had the money *now*."

That's how it was from then on. Every date, every phone call, every conversation ended the same way. With Jesse trying to convince me to go public. Jesse even came by work to talk to me about it.

He was there, talking about how wonderful things could be, the day Lu Mae Wilson walked in. I'd heard, of course, that she was back in town. Right after we graduated from high school, Lu Mae had married some rich coot almost as old as her daddy, and moved east somewhere. Everybody had said then that the marriage wouldn't last six months, as headstrong as Lu Mae was, but they were wrong. It lasted a whole two years; and then suddenly Lu Mae was back, sashaying around town in all those furs her husband had bought her while he was still in a good mood.

That day in Chism's Dress

Shop-Lu-Mae was wearing a dark brown mink that made her blond hair look even lighter. For a second she just stared at Jesse, like he was something she'd just found under her Christmas tree. Then she looked at me, and said, "Oh, am I interrupting something?" She smiled a smile that said she could never really be an interruption.

I said, "Is there anything I can help you with?" but you would've thought I hadn't said a word. Lu Mae barely glanced in my direction.

"Why, I didn't know we had any men this goodlooking in Pigeon Fork," she cooed, batting her eyelashes at Jesse. Her lashes had so much mascara on them it was a wonder she could move them at all.

Jesse smiled back at her. I started feeling real uneasy, watching them smile at each other. "Well," I said, "welcome back, Lu Mae, I'd heard you'd gotten a divorce." I emphasized the last word, hoping that Jesse wouldn't want used goods.

Lu Mae dragged her eyes away from Jesse and turned to me. "Nadine, you heard right." Then she went on just as easy as if we were talking about the weather. "But, you know, divorce takes much too long. If my next husband is ever unfaithful like that no-good jerk I used to be married to, I won't

divorce him. I'll kill him!" Lu Mae laughed at her little joke.

Jesse laughed, too, looking outraged. "Any man who'd run around on a woman like you would have to be crazy," he said.

Lu Mae turned her green eyes full on Jesse and said, "Do you really think so?" It was enough to make you sick to your stomach.

I was looking at Lu Mae, thinking how funny it would be if one of her eyelashes flapped up and down a couple of times when Lu Mae let out a little scream and grabbed her eye. When she did that, she knocked one of her eyelashes loose. Why, that girl was wearing false eyelashes!

After that Lu Mae almost ran out of that store, holding her eye. "I guess I better be going now," she said, all flustered. It was all I could do to keep from laughing.

Jesse, however, didn't look at all amused. He was looking real suspicious. "Did you do something to her?"

"Of course not," I lied. "Although I must say I'm glad she's gone."

Jesse laughed out loud. "Why, I do believe you're jealous!" He took me in his arms then, and added, "I could be all yours, you know." And he started in again on me going public.

I guess I was irritated at the

way he'd smiled at Lu Mae because before I could stop myself I said, real angry-like, "Look, Jesse, you might as well give up. I'll never do that to Mama."

Jesse turned beet-red. "Well, I guess that settles it then," he said coldly. He turned and left.

It was over a week this time before I heard from Jesse again. I was so afraid I'd lost him for good that I was actually sick. I was even sicker when I started hearing the rumors about him and Lu Mae. I didn't know what to do. How could somebody like me compete with somebody like Lu Mae? And I just couldn't do what Jesse asked, either.

Jesse came by my apartment the next Friday night, though, just like nothing had happened. He kept coming around, too, even though the rumors about him and Lu Mae were flying heavy by then.

Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer, so I asked Jesse flat out if all the talk was true. He actually looked relieved. "Nadine, I was hoping you'd bring it up. I just didn't have the heart to tell you. Lu Mae's already talking about getting married. She says that her dad would make me a manager at the sawmill."

It was as if he'd hit me in the stomach. I turned without speaking and went outside. Jesse came up behind me, and put his hand on my shoulder,

and said, "I still love you, Nardine. But I can't be poor all my life. Lu Mae can give me the life I want." He took a deep breath and then added, "You could, too, but you won't."

I shrugged off his hand. "No, I won't," I said. And I hurried inside and locked the door, so he wouldn't see me cry.

Jesse and Lu Mae's wedding was one of the biggest things to ever happen in Pigeon Fork. A lot of people said privately that it was in poor taste to have a second wedding that was even bigger than the first, but that didn't keep them from turning out in droves to watch Lu Mae march Jesse to the altar. Me and Mama and Pa were probably the only people in town who didn't go. Even Parnell and Zeke went. They said their wives made them. I must've cried the whole day.

After Jesse went out of my life, everything seemed suddenly dark. It was as if Jesse took all the light with him. Every once in a while I'd see Jesse and Lu Mae walking down the street. Lu Mae's mouth would always be going a million miles an hour, and I couldn't help but notice that Jesse looked real hang-dog, following along at Lu Mae's heels. I always looked away real quick, though.

Then, one night, almost three years later, I was just closing up the store when I heard some-

body tapping on the door in the back. I turned on the back light and glory be, if it wasn't Jesse standing there. I couldn't speak for a minute. Finally I managed to say, "What do you want?"

"You." That's all he said, and then suddenly I was in Jesse's arms again. Feeling as if I belonged there, just like I used to. "I've missed you so much, Nardine," Jesse said. "I've made an awful mistake, marrying somebody else. It's you I love."

"Oh, Jesse, I love you, too," I said. "I always will." For a minute I was lost in his kiss, but then I had to pull away. I had to. "Jesse," I said, "you're a married man now. This ain't right."

He turned pale. "But, Nardine, I'm miserable without you. We need to be together."

"I'm sorry. Truly. But I just can't be with you until you're free."

As pale as he was before, Jesse flushed dark red at that. "Look, it ain't fair for me to end up with nothing. After three years with that woman, I've earned every penny I've got. If I was to leave Lu Mae, I'd lose everything—my house, my job, my money. Everything."

He started to take me into his arms again, but I summoned every bit of strength I had to pull away. "Then we—we can't see each other, Jesse."

"But Lu Mae would never

find out," Jesse said. "She wouldn't, Nadine. I could leave after she's asleep, just like tonight. And I'd be back before she woke up. She'd never know."

I just stared at him. "No, Jesse," I said, "I couldn't."

Jesse looked as if I'd hit him. Then his face changed, and he looked something else. Something sinister. "There is another solution," he said finally. I listened this time, suddenly afraid. He'd figured it all out. How I could just hold Lu Mae's gas pedal to the floor the next time she was out driving, and all our problems would be solved. "We'd have each other. And the money," Jesse finished. "And you'd never get caught."

I was sure Jesse was just upset, that he didn't really mean what he was saying. Living with that woman had made him so unhappy that he wasn't thinking straight. It broke my heart to listen to him. Finally I had to tell him, "Jesse, I can't do that. Not ever."

He stormed out then. It must've been almost midnight. I heard his car start, and I kept thinking how desperate Jesse had sounded. I started worrying that he might do something awful. That he might actually try to do something to Lu Mae himself.

It occurred to me then that what Jesse needed was a little

push in the right direction. That maybe Jesse just hated to ask Lu Mae for a divorce, just like years ago he'd hated to tell me about Lu Mae. He would no doubt be relieved if something happened that forced him to tell Lu Mae that he wanted out. Then we could finally be together, and I could show him that he didn't need money to be happy.

Today everybody in Pigeon Fork knows what happened that night. Or, at least, what Lu Mae said happened. The newspaper went on and on about how shortly after midnight Lu Mae heard somebody downstairs breaking the glass in the back door. So she got her gun. She said she didn't even know it was Jesse. Until she shot him.

At the coroner's inquest today they ruled it "accidental." I sat there in the courtroom, feeling sick. My Jesse was dead, and they called it an accident. An error. A mistake. I was sure I knew whose error it was, too.

I felt as if I might explode if I didn't get out of that courtroom real quick. I'd just gotten to my apartment when the doorbell rang. I opened the door and Lu Mae walked in, with a kind of smirk on her face. "I saw you at the inquest," she said, "and I just wanted to tell you that I knew all about you and Jesse."

I just looked at her. "There wasn't anything to know," I said.

Her smirk got nasty. "How dumb did you two think I am? I know it was you Jesse sneaked out to see that night." Then she said a lot of nasty things about what a tramp I was, and how somebody as ugly as I was had to have somebody else's man because they couldn't get a man of their own. I wasn't really listening. Instead, I was remembering what I'd heard earlier in the courtroom. I was remembering Lu Mae saying that she didn't have any idea why Jesse was out that late.

Lu Mae turned to leave. "You know," she said, "I'm glad Jesse's dead. Glad!"

We just looked at each other then. I could suddenly see the truth in Lu Mae's eyes. That she'd killed Jesse on purpose. She'd known it wasn't a prowler out there—that it was my sweet Jesse, sneaking back into his own house.

Lu Mae knew what I was thinking, too. Because she gave me a little half smile.

"I'll deny it if you ever tell anybody what I just said." Her smile grew real ugly as she moved toward the door. "By the way, you do re-

member what I said that first day I met Jesse?" She stepped out the door.

I remembered. The next time my husband is unfaithful, I won't divorce him, I'll kill him. That's what she said. And now she wanted me to know what she'd done—to punish me, too, like she'd punished Jesse.

I watched her pull away; and I knew then I had to make it right. I had to make up for a terrible mistake. As Lu Mae was rounding the bend in the road, I held the gas pedal down on her car. Just like Jesse had wanted me to. I kept on holding it down in my mind until I heard the crash.

I think after this I'll be able to keep those promises I made so long ago to my mother. I know now Mama was right. Being able to do this kind of thing is evil. It makes you think you can play God. That you can just reach out with your mind and change people's lives.

Like I did the night Jesse left. I listened to his car pull away, thinking he just needed something to happen to force him to face Lu Mae and ask for a divorce. I was thinking that, and I pictured in my mind every key in Jesse's pocket.

And I bent them.

To Sing, or Cease To Sing



by George Ingersoll

My name's Ben Pierce, and I'm twenty-five percent of the Gross National Product. I had a friend, Pete Starr, who was another twenty-five percent. Before you start checking *Fortune's* list of the top ten, I hasten to add that the Gross National Product is a barbershop quartet. This form of harmony is an addiction far less prevalent than alcohol, and so wholesome it squeaks. But this is about Pete Starr, not four-part harmony.

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

One of Pete's neighbors is a lieutenant in the state police, name of Stein. Pete put Bob Stein in touch with me a while back, in connection with one of his cases, and I've helped him unofficially on several since. That association has grown into a friendship. I'm retired, and Bob's hours are irregular, so it was no surprise to have him call me in mid-afternoon.

I was down in the cellar in my shop, which can't make up its mind whether it wants to be

for woodworking, lapidary, or electronics so it tries to be all three. We have no intercom because an intercom can't compete with the noise of a power saw; if the boss needs me, she thumps heavily on the floor. Works every time. This time, when I surfaced, she said, "It's Bob. Something's wrong . . . I can tell." I grabbed the phone.

"Ben? I'm at Pete's. Pete's dead."

When four people sing barbershop together, something grows up among them. It wouldn't be accurate to call it friendship, or affection; that frequently happens, too, but this is different. Maybe it arises out of their total interdependence to create the barbershop sound, I don't know. I've seen one of the Harlem Globetrotters hurl a ball over his shoulder, never looking back, with complete confidence. He didn't wonder, he *knew* the other guy would be there. That's something like it. It took me a moment to respond to Bob.

"God! We knew his health wasn't a hundred percent, but dead? Heart?" Then Bob dropped the other shoe.

"Ben, he was shot . . . appears he was murdered. Eunice found him. I'm pretty busy right now, looking. Might be a good idea if you and Dot got over here.

"Ben? You hear me?"

"Yes, dammit, I heard you. What happened?"

"Don't know yet. I'll tell you when I know something. I'm busy. I really think Eunice could use some company." He hung up.

The boss never did require small words and short sentences. She'd stuck this evening's casserole in a bag and shut off the washer. "Pete?"

"Yeah . . . let's go."

I'll skip the next few hours' exercise in misery and futility. Those who've been there know it, and those who haven't don't need it. The right people assembled. The necessary things got done. When the boss and I left that small band of friends, the Starr kids had been told and were en route home, and Eunice, slightly sedated, was under the wing of our tenor and his wife. Somehow, the manner of Pete's passing did not arise . . . the fact was sufficient.

Dot and I went home, had a stiff drink, and were pretending to watch the evening news when Bob appeared. Turned out none of us had eaten and nobody was much interested, so the boss made Bob a drink, too.

"Thanks," he said. "I shouldn't take this because I'm working. Ben, tell me everything you know about Pete Starr."

"God, Bob! If expletives are

deleted, I'm speechless. You were his next door neighbor, I only sang with him. You probably know more about Pete than we do. *We want you* to tell us what happened. Have you got the SOB yet?"

"Easy, friend. You first. I told you, I'm working. You knew Pete under different conditions entirely."

"Okay . . . Pete was a good natural baritone, but he couldn't read worth a damn. He was a calm, unflappable guy, and he seemed to live by the Scout law. If anyone thought ill of him, I never heard about it. He obviously wasn't affluent . . . he used to joke about living in the world's only wind tunnel with a second mortgage, and him not having the price of storm windows. By peddling hardware, he kept groceries on the table and two kids in school. He had about as much pretense and ambition as Mahatma Ghandi. He loved his family, Meredith Wilson, and Robert Parker, in that order. And we both loved him. That's too long for an epitaph and too short for a eulogy, but it's the best I can do. Your turn." The boss came over and kissed my bald spot.

"Pete was alone at home," said Bob. "Eunice was visiting her mother and got back early this afternoon. Pete was supposed to meet her at the bus

station. When he didn't show and didn't answer the phone, she took a cab home. She found him in his shop, in the garage, shot through the right temple. The door from the garage to the breezeway was ajar, and there was no, repeat, no sign of a gun anywhere when we got there. His wallet was on him, with about twenty dollars in it, and nothing had been taken from the house that Eunice could tell us about. That's all we know, for now."

The boss started to say something, changed her mind, and left the room abruptly. Bob and I looked at each other for a moment, then he thanked me for the scotch and left. It had been bourbon, but neither of us was at his best right then.

There was no funeral, but Eunice did have a memorial service. She'd asked the three remaining members of the GNP to sing something . . . just the three of us. The old riderless horse thing. We didn't try; none of us would have been able to get through it. We saw Bob Stein there, but nobody wanted to talk.

In fact, we didn't get a chance to talk to Bob for close to a week. Then he came in and plonked down in his usual spot at the kitchen table. When the last zillion Indians rode over the hill, Custer probably looked

happier than Robert did at that point. Uncharacteristically, he declined the offer of a beer.

"Robert," said the boss, "I'll polish your handcuffs if it would make you feel any better. What is it?"

"The captain took me off Pete's case. Mumbled something about 'personal involvement.' You know, he's right. I've been getting seriously pulled in both directions for a week, to the point where I was about ready to ask to be relieved from the case anyway. I've never done that."

He stopped to scratch our tomcat above the eyes. Bob and that cat have developed a guarded understanding. Wolfe and Cramer.

"Here's what I've got. Pete was terminally ill. It showed up in the autopsy. Eunice didn't know about it. I talked with his doctor. It had shown up in the course of a routine physical, and Pete knew but never told anyone, apparently. About a month ago he bought a big insurance policy, with Eunice as beneficiary. It paid double indemnity in case of accidental death, but in case of suicide, the beneficiary collected only premiums paid, with interest. Standard stuff.

"There's more, I'm afraid. He was shot from close range, and there were powder grains in his

right hand. Eunice says there was an old World War II Luger in a bedroom drawer, but we couldn't find it. The slug that took him was 9mm . . . Luger size. We found the expended shell case. It matched the brand name on the box in the bedroom drawer where the gun had been kept.

"Alice Barnes, his neighbor on the other side, saw Pete come in; he was alone. We put the whole neighborhood through the filter . . . no tramps, no door-to-doors, no strange cars . . . nothing.

"The police verdict would be unanimous for suicide but for the lack of that gun. The M.E. says . . . death was instantaneous . . . there's no way he could have disposed of it."

The boss never stops thinking. "I could choke on this, Bob, but why have you ruled out some form of participation by Eunice?"

"Naturally we had to consider that. She couldn't have done it, because the M.E. says there's no doubt that Pete was dead before her bus got in. The cab who delivered her radioed in when he dropped her, and the cab company logs the time on such calls. The local police log shows the time when she made the 911 call. Only about four minutes' difference. Your local

cruiser was there in just under five minutes after that, and the cruiser boys noted the state she was in. We simply don't believe that, in that time and state, she could have contrived to hide a gun someplace we haven't looked, even if she had realized there was a reason for her to do that. She didn't know about the insurance.

"That's not hard evidence, of course . . . our opinions . . . but most cops are also people. Eunice is out. I'll take that beer now if the offer's still good."

"Robert," said the boss, "I don't care what Ben says. . . . I think you're people."

The days rolled by and things resumed a more or less even keel. The Starr kids went back to school.

Eunice went to stay with her mother, briefly, then came back and took up her part-time job. The insurance company reluctantly agreed to pay on Pete's policy. The GNP decided to break up, then found another bari and decided to keep going. The boss muttered, "' . . . To sing or cease to sing, we never know . . . '"

I'm not sure where Robert was doing his brooding, but we didn't see much of him. I was doing my brooding down in the cellar. Finally I told the boss, "I'm going to call Eunice. Pete

had a whole garage full of good tools; lots of samples, and stuff that he couldn't sell. If she goes the tag sale route, she'll get maybe five cents on the dollar for what they're worth. And I can use most of them downstairs. I'm going to look it all over and offer her a fair price for the lot. She certainly doesn't need all that stuff."

She looked me square in the eye and said, "' . . . Do a good deed by stealth.'"

"Pope?" It was a game we played. She was English lit, and liked to pretend that engineers could only count, not read. Mainly she was right.

"Lamb."

"What stealth? I can use the stuff and she can't. I'm certainly not going to take advantage of her."

"Ben," she said, "if you find it, don't tell me. I've been hoping that you got there before Bob. Poor baby, he'd have a terrible time with it." I said before, she never stops thinking.

"Hon, I haven't the faintest notion what you're talking about. That 'poor baby' got two Zekes and a Betty before he came home and started handing out traffic tickets. If you're going to worry about somebody, start worrying about whether my new blood-pressure pills are going to work any better than the last ones did."

Eunice readily agreed. "Bless you, Ben. Just leave me a hammer, pliers, and a big and little screwdriver." So I was officially blessed when I pulled up in front of the Starrs' two-car garage next evening. Bob's house was dark. Pete's middle-aged station wagon was in one bay, the back still loaded with Pete's samples. The other bay was his shop. I pulled out a pocket notebook and began to catalogue the tools. This wasn't hard because most of them were in plain sight; Pete had belonged to the nail-'em-on-the-wall school.

A solid workbench stretched along one wall, with a toolboard over the bench. The toolboard was a sheet of plywood nailed to the studs lengthwise, so that the top of it was within reach of someone standing at the bench. It was neatly painted, with the outline of each tool marked off in contrasting paint. That shop was Pete's pride and joy. I listed all the tools on the board, then went on to examine the contents of the station wagon, some cabinets, and a couple of cartons of stuff in the "not much good but too good to throw away" category. I was looking around carefully as I worked, just as Bob and his boys must have looked around.

I wasn't sure what I was look-

ing for, which made it harder, and I very nearly missed it when I did find it. Along the top edge of the toolboard, between two of the studs to which it was attached, were several fresh digs and scratches in the paint. On hands and knees, I reached back, under the bench, and felt between these studs. A strip of wood had been nailed across between them. None of the other studs sported such a feature; only those two. Anything dropped over the top of the toolboard between those studs would be trapped back there, and could not fall through to the floor. Unusual.

I knew that, even if I got up on the bench, I'd never be able to get my eyes past the edge of the board to peer down in, and it would be too dark in there to see anything, anyway. Clearly, a flashlight and mirror were called for. A flashlight I had in my car, but where to get a mirror? While I was pondering this, the breezeway door opened and Bob Stein walked in. His manner was casual, but his eyes were busy.

"Good evening, Lamont. I was sitting next door, just now, idly wondering what evil may be lurking in the hearts of men, when I saw your car, so I thought I'd drop over and ask you. And what do I find? Here you are, poking around among all these

valuable tools. I think I'll hang a B and E on you. With good behavior you should be back on the street inside a year."

"Listen, copper! You ever hear of Miranda and/or warrants? You can't just walk in here! This ain't Russia, you know. Besides, I've got the owner's permission. You try it and I'll sue the whole state police and turn your barracks into a bowling alley! Might be fun to have a bowling alley."

"Standoff! I'm no match for a desperado like you when I don't have my piece. Hey, Ben! You don't happen to have a piece on you, do you?"

Ignoring this, I explained my mission in Pete's garage, phase one of which, the assay, was now complete. I then complained bitterly that the state police hadn't invited me next door for a beer, yet. This gross miscarriage of justice was quickly rectified, after which I considered it prudent to go home and spend what was left of the evening not answering unspoken questions. Of course, the boss scented a trace of beer and demanded to know whether I'd been hitting the singles bars.

"Nope. I was only listing the tools in Pete's garage. Bob was there. He helped."

Next day I went down to my shop and spent some time cutting up and twisting together

some wire coat hangers to form a long, semi-stiff probe with a hook on the end. While the boss was at the supermarket I filched a small hand-mirror from one of her handbags and stowed all this stuff in my trunk, along with a flashlight and a pair of work gloves. That evening I called Bob's number. No answer. I waited twenty minutes and called again. Still no answer, so I called Eunice and told her I was coming over to finish up. I fervently hoped I spoke the truth.

Once there, I wasted no time. Pulling on the gloves, I knelt on the bench, held the mirror at an angle between the studs, aimed the flashlight into it, and peered down. There it was! The Luger, peering up at me, lying on top of something. I set to work with the coat hangers, and, in a few minutes, up it came. An old sash weight had been tied to the trigger guard with a length of Venetian blind cord.

What Pete had done was obvious . . . he'd hung the weight over the top of the toolboard with the cord stretched taut. After the shot was fired, the weight pulled the gun from his fingers, up and over, then down behind the board, safely out of sight.

I extracted the clip. Empty. The action was closed, so there

had to be a round still in the chamber. Pete hadn't wanted the action open, to catch on something and maybe hang up as the gun went over the top. He'd probably practiced a few times to make sure it would work out; hence the scratches and digs on the toolboard. I opened the thing carefully, and removed the round.

I cut the cord loose and threw it in the trash, and dumped the sash weight in one of the cartons of junk. Then I pocketed the gun and the extra round and headed home, reflecting ruefully that Pete's insurance company was the same one that handled my pension. En route, I made a slight detour over the bridge that spans the river on the edge of town. It's deep there, and it floods enthusiastically every spring.

I must have been unusually quiet next day, and the boss knows all my moods. Finally, as evening approached and, with it, happy hour, she said, "What is it, Ben, '... still and quiet conscience ...'?"

"The Bard. Gotcha!" While I was seeking a suitable response we heard Bob's small car laboring up the drive. He should get that thing fixed. I began to wonder whether there had been

something in the paper that I'd missed, about my last night's escapade.

If I was morose, Robert seemed more chipper than we'd seen him since the event. He readily accepted an invitation to stay for dinner when the boss convinced him it was only meat loaf, and would stretch. "Dot," he said, "somebody else's meat loaf beats steak when I have to fix the steak myself and eat it alone." Bob's a widower. When the boss left to get what remained of a pecan pie, I asked Bob whether there had been any progress on Pete's case.

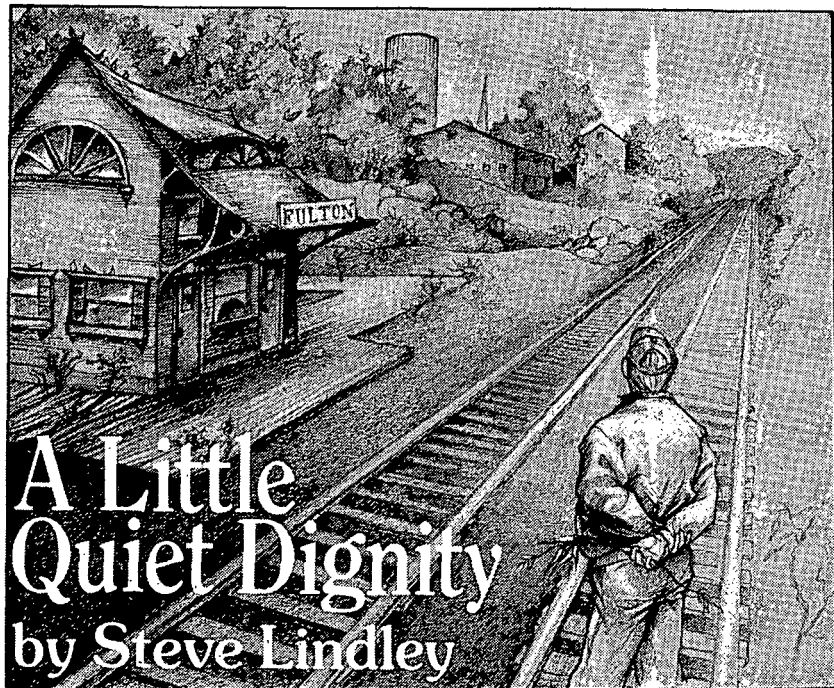
"No," he said, slowly. "It's been too long... the feeling at the barracks is that whoever shot Pete is quite safe. Personally, I don't believe that gun will ever be found... now."

"Now?"

"Yeah. You see, I was coming into our street last night, just as you were leaving Pete's. You didn't see me; in fact it didn't seem as though you were seeing anything. You were driving with your head up and locked. Just for the hell of it, I followed you. You'd make a lousy hood. You never even looked back."

"You followed me. All the way?"

"Not all the way. Far enough."



A Little Quiet Dignity

by Steve Lindley

“What’s he doing now?” Maggie, squirming on hold, couldn’t leave her desk phone. She was relying on Bill’s lazy eyes which, in her opinion, weren’t straining hard enough through the old station’s filthy window.

“Still nothing,” Bill told her.

“Well, he must be doing something.”

Bill turned to her, faced her squeezed, lined lips, the little white hairs curving in with the wrinkles. Just like a monkey, he thought. An old monkey staring through the station

window’s bars at him. Might as well be at the zoo around feeding time. “Well, he’s not,” he said. “He’s just not doing nothing.”

“A man does nothing,” Maggie insisted, “he does it at home in bed.” Bill raised his eyebrows. Maggie glared. “I mean, at seven in the morning a man don’t go out to stand on the railroad tracks. And here he is again.”

“It’s been seven years.”

“I know how long it’s been. But here he is again. Time don’t mean anything with some people.”

Bill winced. Seven years ago he'd had this same argument with Maggie. And seven years before that he'd been here having a different argument with her. And seven years before that. . . . And every day he waved past a dozen or so trains with his feet set securely on the same patch of Fulton County soil. That was as close as he ever got to going anywhere. Maggie was right. Time didn't mean anything to some people.

He got a moment's break as Maggie took a reservation for a coach fare from Fulton to Batesville. Whoever was on the phone must have asked Maggie about the new train station which they were starting construction on tomorrow, and that usually would have been good for a fifteen minute reprieve, so he headed over to the candy machine. But Maggie wasn't done with him yet. She cupped her hand over the receiver.

"Maybe," she scolded Bill, "if someone in this station had been here to give a darn in the middle of the night seven years ago, that boy never would have snuck onto the 2:10 and old Wesley wouldn't have gone off the deep end in the first place and we wouldn't have to keep an eye on him now wandering around out there."

"Yeah, yeah." An old story. "So, who's it keeping an eye on him? I don't see you—"

"We got a freight coming through in ten minutes, you know. It's heading south, you know. He's out there—"

"What do you think he's gonna do?" Bill interrupted. "Think he's going to lay his head on the rail and wait for a freight moving at fifteen miles per hour to slice it off?" He dropped fifty cents in the machine and yanked the knob under the Milky Way. It made a sound like wheels rolling over bone, making Maggie shiver. Bill continued, "A man wants to kill himself this early in the day, he does it at home in bed." He chuckled at his little comeback, took half the candy bar into his mouth in one bite, and looked back out the crusted window. "He's not doing nothing."

What Wesley was doing out there was pulling a weed which had grown up through a split railroad tie. It wasn't a purposeless act. When a person decides to stop walking without having reached any specific point, he usually finds some way to punctuate the act. Maybe he'll kick at a stone or retie one of his boots. Wesley picked a weed because this was a good place to stop.

The main track was a good twenty feet to his left, the Fulton Station sixty feet behind him. He was standing on a short section of track that hadn't seen any use anyone in Fulton

County could remember. The gravel into which it had been laid had been disappearing underneath tall weeds for years. Another ten paces would have brought him to its end, but he had no reason to walk it. He had pulled weeds there before.

No, this spot was just fine. It was quiet—cool, early morning quiet. What was it about gray sky and still-wet grass that seemed to muffle all sounds? He couldn't hear Maggie taking reservations over the phone, or Bill pulling knobs on the candy machine, getting his breakfast. No highway, no planes, just silent track waiting for a train, waiting for the City of New Orleans to come pounding over it in the middle of the night, bending the track under its weight, pushing through the border from Kentucky to Tennessee, marking its halfway point between Chicago and New Orleans.

A little quiet dignity. That's what Bill would call it. It was his term, suited to most occasions he encountered during the day. Maybe a kid would start yelling in the station, or an argument would get too loud, or Maggie would let the phone ring one too many times. Bill had the term. "Hey," he would cry out, letting the customers know they were considered nothing more or less than guests in his moth-eaten station house. "Do you think we might have

a little quiet dignity around here?" Then nothing could be heard but the raspy clunk of a knob being pulled on the candy machine.

Wesley hadn't expected to be there to hear those sounds this morning. Now he was standing out of earshot not because he didn't want to listen to them but because he couldn't trust himself to keep a clear head if he did hear them one last time. That's just one price you pay for living your entire life in one county.

"Surveying?" A new sound, boot heels against gravel. Wesley turned, saw Bill coming down the track, stepping between the ties. "What are you doing? Surveying?"

"No," Wesley said. "Just looking."

"Looking." Bill lit a cigarette, a good excuse to stop beside Wesley. The act looked almost too delicate for his thick fingers to handle, and he was a little nervous anyway, though he had known Wesley all his life. He had been sent out by Maggie to make certain Wesley was in his right mind, and he wasn't too fond of any conversation with a purpose to it.

"Looking at what?" he said. "Nothing here yet. Not till the end of summer, anyway." Bill smoked, waited for a response. None came. There he was, in another fix resulting from Mag-

gie's constant nagging. He tried again. "I don't see why they need a new station anyway. I didn't ask for one. Maggie didn't ask for one. Hell, nobody did. They just got some extra money again, is all. Instead of giving it back to us, they say, 'Hey, let's build us a new station. That'll be fun. Don't matter that nobody cares. We can make a new one fifty feet away from the old one.' That makes a lot of sense, doesn't it. So they're going to put it here, right here where we're standing, and then we'll have two stations one right next to the other. More sense."

"It's just a change, Bill," Wesley said. "It doesn't have to make sense. And you've been given two legs of your own to walk along with it."

Bill peered closely at his friend, tried to figure out if that last remark was just the sort of thing Maggie had sent him out to evaluate, but he couldn't see that it proved anything so he offered his own opinion.

"Well," he said, "my legs were happy standing where they were; they don't have to be moved no fifty feet south. The station's just fine as it is. Just replace what little wood has rotted. Not much. You don't need all the chrome, the big plate glass. Who do they think's getting off this train? You don't need your cement walks all—"

"Bill," Wesley interrupted,

looking down the tracks. The freight could just barely be seen now, a distant light twinkling. "Did Maggie send you out here to keep an eye on me?"

"Who? Maggie? What—no, why—"

"Then cut it, will you? Can't you be quiet for just one minute in the morning?" He took his eyes off the tracks and looked straight at Bill. "A little quiet dignity, huh?"

Bill was that type of big, happy man who was entirely unaccustomed to having his feelings hurt, and the shock of having his own words thrown back at him by his friend caused him to do just what Wesley had asked. He shut up—at least, as much as he could. He muttered to himself for a moment, winding down, walked in a small circle, kicking at weeds. When he was a few steps away he turned and took a long look at his friend's face. How often does a man do that? How often does one have to?

The last time had been seven summers ago. Everyone had been looking that way at Wesley then for a good month, each glance a careful surveying of the lines of his face, searching for changes. It had been Maggie's idea, really. "Keep an eye on him, Bill," she had said, starting it all, as usual. "The way he hangs out on those tracks every morning, either

he's waiting for his boy to come back or he's planning to go after him. Just keep a good look on his eyes to be sure he doesn't do anything stupid. He's a quiet man who's had some bad luck and it's a worrisome combination."

But if it was bad luck, it was luck of his own making. Wesley was a quiet man, all right. He had always been quiet and slow-moving—not slow in the head; a good look in his eyes told you he picked up everything that went on around him—it was just that Bill had never seen him quicken his pace for anything. It was that slowness which, in Bill's eyes, caused him to marry Suzanne in the first place.

Suzy was one of those girls you just knew was going to zip out of Fulton County as soon as she could afford her first pair of designer tennis shoes, one of those girls who only shut her mouth in order to swallow, and even then sometimes forgetting to do that. But she finished high school and then stayed the next summer without buying a train ticket, then got stuck the next winter. And it was during the cold of that winter that she warmed up to Wesley. Being so quiet allowed him a lot of listening time, and if you didn't know either of them you might have said they made the perfect couple.

The day before Suzy and Wesley were married, Bill took Wesley out for beers at Charly's. He got him drunk before he warned him. Bill wasn't one to risk a friendship over advice. He only told him what everyone was saying.

"Maybe this is all happening too fast for you to keep up with," Bill had told him. "It's one thing to stand still and let her run circles around you, another to take hold of her hand. If you just didn't show up tomorrow, I'll guarantee no one will hold it against you, except maybe Suzanne." Which was true. Everyone was on Wesley's side in this affair, as his silence never offended anyone whereas Suzy always had something to say about somebody else, making one wonder just what she was telling others about *them*.

But Bill hadn't lost the friendship and Wesley hadn't taken the advice.

Wesley made two mistakes immediately. He took Suzy to New Orleans for a week's honeymoon and he got her pregnant. Hardly anyone in Fulton had ever been outside the state of Kentucky which made Suzy the self-appointed culture expert. She began wearing dresses which were never meant to be taken out of a display window, and talking about New Orleans as if she had been born and raised there and was just a vis-

iting dignitary to Fulton County.

People stopped inviting the couple to parties. They missed Wesley's company, of course. Even though he never said much, it was warming just to have him sitting around so they could just bounce words off him. But no one could tolerate Suzy's incessant jabber about how much better things were in New Orleans or the way she'd show off her clothes, as if anybody was around to appreciate them, or the way she'd order the host to mix her another drink while everyone else was drinking drinks which didn't need to be mixed and didn't need pieces of summer fruit floating around in them.

So, in the absence of company, they were all hoping that Clayton, Wesley and Suzy's only child (his name was the only thing Wesley ever insisted upon—Suzy was all for calling him Maurice, and sometimes did, anyway) might grow up to be quiet like his father, providing a family cushion for Suzy's flightiness. But he didn't. He was the worst combination of the two of them, inheriting Wesley's strength and his mother's craziness.

The demon seed was what Bill called Clayton, though it was hard to hate him considering he was Wesley's son. He wasn't the usual kind of troub-

lesome boy like Todd Foster's son, leading a kind of gang driving Saturday night cars and shooting at people's dogs; that kind of trouble they were used to. Clayton was a loner. He had no friends. He seemed to think himself a prince of sorts, growing up in the wrong kingdom, that he had a right to anything and anyone.

Wesley seemed to lose control of the boy early. The town had to let pass the trouble Clayton had gotten the girls into, figuring it took two to make that kind of trouble, but every time he was arrested for theft, Wesley would come into court in his slow walk and bail the boy out. Clayton had taken to hanging around the train station, allowing Bill a bird's-eye view of his progress or lack of it. The boy had been given a train set at a young age, and it had turned into a full-blown hobby, financed by whoever left their property lying around for Clayton's taking.

"You won't have to shell out any more money on my account," Clayton would tell his father outside the court over lunch. "I'm getting out of here, going to New Orleans. I'd go now if you'd give me the money for a train ticket." And Wesley would just eat in silence.

"Don't have to wonder where the boy got that notion," Bill told Maggie once after his candy

machine had been broken into. He knew who did it, but didn't make a fuss for Wesley's sake. It would just cost his friend another fifty dollars.

"There hasn't been any real trouble yet," Maggie replied. "But it'll come. Soon enough. Keep an eye out."

"Yeah, yeah." An old story.

The trouble finally came seven years ago. On a Saturday night, the house which had always been noisy (Suzy and Clayton could make a hell of a racket between the two of them in a difference of opinion) was suddenly silent. Wesley had been out helping Todd Foster pull his truck engine. Clayton, to all accounts, had been drunk and went home early. Maybe his mother ordered him to mix something with some fruit in it and the boy wasn't in the mood, because when Todd drove Wesley home at nine they found Suzy dead at the bottom of the stairs, her skull cracked. The boy was gone. They split up and searched for him all night until Bill remembered what the boy had always said about New Orleans, but by then it was too late. The 2:10 City of New Orleans had been gone for over four hours already. They wired the authorities from Winona south, but they never did find Clayton.

The coroner said Suzy's head had been cracked with the engine from the model train set,

that she had been thrown down the stairs afterward. Maggie said that was only fitting.

And that was when Wesley lost all his sense.

"You're not going to find that boy now," Bill said to Wesley, who was still staring at the tracks. Bill squinted, could see the freight coming, the engine's face a flat blob made jelly by the rising cool off the ground. "How long have you been out here, anyway?"

He had looked hard at Wesley, a day's growth of beard on his face and neck, eyelids too anxious to drop. The cuffs of his pants were wet, the weeds around them dry, the dew burnt off by the sun.

"You've been out here all night, haven't you?" he continued. "You were going to get on the 2:10. What stopped you?"

"It's been seven years, Bill. You can let me alone, now."

"So, what are you doing out here then, if it's been seven years? Maybe you want to answer one question for once in your life?"

Wesley didn't look at him, instead took a few steps toward the main track. Bill followed, keeping right up beside him. "What would that question be?" Wesley said finally.

"You ain't . . . you ain't going to . . . like . . ."

"Like what?"

"You've had some hard luck.

Like, get on the track, in front of that train . . . ”

Wesley smiled. That confused Bill. “Do I look that crazy?” he said. “No, I never thought about that. I’m not the type to make that much noise.”

Bill’s relief was covered by his embarrassment. Of course that was crazy. He wanted to tell Wesley that if it hadn’t been for Maggie, he wouldn’t have thought of that himself. Have Maggie again!

Instead he said, “You already lost a wife and a son. You’ve got to say goodbye to it; those changes you were talking about. All you got left is us. That’s a lot more than most people have.”

“More than I deserve, I suppose.”

“When you had the trouble we never forgot about you. We were all on your side. We still can be, you know.”

“That’s the worst part, Bill. You’ll never forget me.”

Bill opened his mouth, but the sound of the freight’s horn kept him from saying anything. Over by the station he could hear the gate’s bells start to ring. Wesley took one more step away from him so Bill was standing behind him.

“After all we’ve done for you,” was what he wanted to say. “All the watching, the cracked egg-shell treatment, and you finally just run off anyway, to find a son who never treated you with

any respect. It just doesn’t make sense.”

But Bill never got to say any of it. Wesley had to break into a sprint to catch up to the car he had chosen. It was the first time Bill had ever seen him run for anything, and he turned away. He had waved at enough passing trains; he didn’t have to watch this one go by. When he did turn back it was only to watch the back of the caboose shrink into a dot. A caboose. They were phasing them out too. Didn’t need them any more. Where were they going to go?

The next day they brought in a bulldozer to tear up the short pieces of track and begin digging a foundation for the new station. Through the filthy window of the old station, Bill watched it move the earth while Maggie squirmed on the phone and pestered him for reports of its progress. After half a day they stopped digging and a little crowd gathered. Maggie called the sheriff on her phone. He brought in the coroner around two o’clock.

Yes, that was bone they had dug up. Human bone. Looked like it belonged to a young man, a teenager probably.

They wired the authorities from Dyersburg on south, but never did find Wesley.

And seven years of quiet dignity came to an end.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Screaming Skull

by F. Marion
Crawford



Illustration by Eric Chan

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I have often heard it scream. No, I am not nervous, I am not imaginative, and I never believed in ghosts, unless that thing is one. Whatever it is, it hates me almost as much as it hated Luke Pratt, and it screams at me.

If I were you, I would never tell ugly stories about ingenious ways of killing people, for you never can tell but that someone at the table may be tired of his or her nearest and dearest. I have always blamed myself for Mrs. Pratt's death, and I suppose I was responsible for it in a way, though heaven knows I never wished her anything but long life and happiness. If I had not told that story she might be alive yet. That is why the thing screams at me, I fancy.

She was a good little woman, with a sweet temper, all things considered, and a nice gentle voice; but I remember hearing her shriek once when she thought her little boy was killed by a pistol that went off, though everyone was sure that it was not loaded. It was the same scream; exactly the same, with a sort of rising quaver at the end; do you know what I mean? Unmistakable.

The truth is, I had not realized that the doctor and his wife were not on good terms. They used to bicker a bit now and then when I was here, and I often noticed that little Mrs. Pratt got very red and bit her lip hard to keep her temper, while Luke grew pale and said the most offensive things. He was that sort when he was in the nursery, I remember, and afterward at school. He was my cousin, you know; that is how I came by this house; after he died, and his boy Charley was killed in South Africa, there were no relations left. Yes, it's a pretty little property, just the sort of thing for an old sailor like me who has taken to gardening.

One always remembers one's mistakes much more vividly than one's cleverest things, doesn't one? I've often noticed it. I was dining with the Pratts one night, when I told them the story that afterwards made so much difference. It was a wet night in November, and the sea was moaning. Hush!—if you don't speak you will hear it now. . . .

Do you hear the tide? Gloomy sound, isn't it? Sometimes, about this time of year—hallo!—there it is! Don't be frightened, man—it won't eat you—it's only a noise, after all! But I'm glad you've heard it, because there are always people who think it's the wind, or my imagination, or something. You won't hear it again tonight, I fancy, for it doesn't often come more than once. Yes—that's right. Put another stick on the fire, and a little more stuff into that weak

mixture you're so fond of. Do you remember old Blauklot the carpenter, on that German ship that picked us up when the *Clontarf* went to the bottom? We were hove to in a howling gale one night, as snug as you please, with no land within five hundred miles, and the ship coming up and falling off as regularly as clockwork—"Biddy te boor beebles ashore tis night, poys!" old Blauklot sang out, as he went off to his quarters with the sail maker. I often think of that, now that I'm ashore for good and all.

Yes, it was on a night like this, when I was at home for a spell, waiting to take the *Olympia* out on her first trip—it was on the next voyage that she broke the record, you remember—but that dates it. Ninety-two was the year, early in November.

The weather was dirty. Pratt was out of temper, and the dinner was bad, very bad indeed, which didn't improve matters, and cold, which made it worse. The poor little lady was very unhappy about it, and insisted on making a Welsh rarebit on the table to counteract the raw turnips and the half-boiled mutton. Pratt must have had a hard day. Perhaps he had lost a patient. At all events, he was in a nasty temper.

"My wife is trying to poison me, you see!" he said. "She'll succeed some day." I saw that she was hurt, and I made believe to laugh, and said that Mrs. Pratt was much too clever to get rid of her husband in such a simple way; and then I began to tell them about Japanese tricks with spun glass and chopped horsehair and the like.

Pratt was a doctor, and knew a lot more than I did about such things, but that only put me on my mettle, and I told a story about a woman in Ireland who did for three husbands before anyone suspected foul play.

Did you ever hear that tale? The fourth husband managed to keep awake and caught her, and she was hanged. How did she do it? She drugged them, and poured melted lead into their ears through a little horn funnel when they were asleep. . . . No—that's the wind whistling. It's backing up to the southward again. I can tell by the sound. Besides, the other thing doesn't often come more than once in an evening even at this time of year—when it happened. Yes, it was in November. Poor Mrs. Pratt died suddenly in her bed not long after I dined here. I can fix the date, because I got the news in New York by the steamer that followed the *Olympia* when I took her out on her first trip. You had the *Leofric* the same year? Yes, I remember. What a pair of old buffers we are coming

to be, you and I. Nearly fifty years since we were apprentices together on the *Clontarf*. Shall you ever forget old Blauklot? "Biddy te boor beebles ashore, poys!" Ha, ha! Take a little more, with all that water. It's the old Hulstkamp I found in the cellar when this house came to me, the same I brought Luke from Amsterdam five-and-and-twenty years ago. He had never touched a drop of it. Perhaps he's sorry now, poor fellow.

Where did I leave off? I told you that Mrs. Pratt died suddenly—yes. Luke must have been lonely here after she was dead, I should think; I came to see him now and then, and he looked worn and nervous, and told me that his practice was growing too heavy for him, though he wouldn't take an assistant on any account. Years went on, and his son was killed in South Africa, and after that he began to be queer. There was something about him not like other people. I believe he kept his senses in his profession to the end; there was no complaint of his having made bad mistakes in cases, or anything of that sort, but he had a look about him—

Luke was a redheaded man with a pale face when he was young, and he was never stout; in middle age he turned a sandy grey, and after his son died he grew thinner, till his head looked like a skull with parchment stretched over it very tight, and his eyes had a sort of glare in them that was very disagreeable to look at.

He had an old dog that poor Mrs. Pratt had been fond of, and that used to follow her everywhere. He was a bulldog, and the sweetest tempered beast you ever saw, though he had a way of hitching his upper lip behind one of his fangs that frightened strangers a good deal. Sometimes, of an evening, Pratt and Bumble—that was the dog's name—used to sit and look at each other a long time, thinking about old times, I suppose, when Luke's wife used to sit in that chair you've got. That was always her place, and this was the doctor's, where I'm sitting. Bumble used to climb up by the footstool—he was old and fat by that time, and could not jump much, and his teeth were getting shaky. He would look steadily at Luke, and Luke looked steadily at the dog, his face growing more and more like a skull with two little coals for eyes; and after about five minutes or so, though it may have been less, old Bumble would suddenly begin to shake all over, and all on a sudden he would set up an awful howl, as if he had been shot, and tumble out of the easy chair and trot away, and hide himself under the sideboard, and lie there making odd noises.

Considering Pratt's looks in those last months, the thing is not

surprising, you know. I'm not nervous or imaginative, but I can quite believe he might have sent a sensitive woman into hysterics—his head looked so much like a skull in parchment.

At last I came down one day before Christmas, when my ship was in dock and I had three weeks off. Bumble was not about, and I said casually that I supposed the old dog was dead.

"Yes," Pratt answered, and I thought there was something odd in his tone even before he went on after a little pause. "I killed him," he said presently. "I could stand it no longer."

I asked what it was that Luke could not stand, though I guessed well enough.

"He had a way of sitting in her chair and glaring at me, and then howling," Luke shivered a little. "He didn't suffer at all, poor old Bumble," he went on in a hurry, as if he thought I might imagine he had been cruel. "I put dionine into his drink to make him sleep soundly, and then I chloroformed him gradually, so that he could not have felt suffocated even if he was dreaming. It's been quieter since then."

I wondered what he meant, for the words slipped out as if he could not help saying them. I've understood since. He meant that he did not hear that noise so often after the dog was out of the way. Perhaps he thought at first that it was old Bumble in the yard howling at the moon, though it's not that kind of noise, is it? Besides, I know what it is, if Luke didn't. It's only a noise after all, and a noise never hurt anybody yet. But he was much more imaginative than I am. No doubt there really is something about this place that I don't understand; but when I don't understand a thing, I call it a phenomenon, and I don't take it for granted that it's going to kill me, as he did. I don't understand everything, by long odds, nor do you, nor does any man who has been to sea. We used to talk of tidal waves, for instance, and we could not account for them; now we account for them by calling them submarine earthquakes, and we branch off into fifty theories, any one of which might make earthquakes quite comprehensible if we only knew what they were. I fell in with one of them once, and the inkstand flew straight up from the table against the ceiling of my cabin. The same thing happened to Captain Lecky—I dare say you've read about it in his "Wrinkles." Very good. If that sort of thing took place ashore, in this room for instance, a nervous person would talk about spirits and levitation and fifty things that mean nothing, instead of just quietly setting it down as a "phenomenon" that has

not been explained yet. My view of that voice, you see.

Besides, what is there to prove that Luke killed his wife? I would not even suggest such a thing to anyone but you. After all, there was nothing but the coincidence that poor little Mrs. Pratt died suddenly in her bed a few days after I told that story at dinner. She was not the only woman who ever died like that. Luke got the doctor over from the next parish, and they agreed that she had died of something the matter with her heart. Why not? It's common enough.

Of course, there was the ladle. I never told anybody about that, and it made me start when I found it in the cupboard in the bedroom. It was new, too—a little tinned iron ladle that had not been in the fire more than once or twice and there was some lead in it that had been melted, and stuck to the bottom of the bowl, all grey, with hardened dross on it. But that proves nothing. A country doctor is generally a handyman, who does everything for himself, and Luke may have had a dozen reasons for melting a little lead in a ladle. He was fond of sea-fishing, and he may have cast a sinker for a nightline; perhaps it was a weight for the hall clock, or something like that. All the same, when I found it I had a rather queer sensation, because it looked so much like the thing I had described when I told them the story. Do you understand? It affected me unpleasantly, and I threw it away; it's at the bottom of the sea a mile from the Spit, and it will be jolly well rusted beyond recognizing if it's ever washed up by the tide.

You see, Luke must have bought it in the village, years ago, for the man sells just such ladles still. I suppose they are used in cooking. In any case, there was no reason why an inquisitive housemaid should find such a thing lying about, with lead in it, and wonder what it was, and perhaps talk to the maid who heard me tell the story at dinner—for that girl married the plumber's son in the village, and may remember the whole thing.

You understand me, don't you? Now that Luke Pratt is dead and gone, and lies buried beside his wife, with an honest man's tombstone at his head, I should not care to stir up anything that could hurt his memory. They are both dead, and their son, too. There was trouble enough about Luke's death, as it was.

How? He was found dead on the beach one morning, and there was a coroner's inquest. There were marks on his throat, but he had not been robbed. The verdict was that he had come to his end "by the hands or teeth of some person or animal unknown," for half

the jury thought it might have been a big dog that had thrown him down and gripped his windpipe, though the skin of his throat was not broken. No one knew at what time he had gone out, nor where he had been. He was found lying on his back above high-water mark, and an old cardboard bandbox that had belonged to his wife lay under his hand, open. The lid had fallen off. He seemed to have been carrying home a skull in the box—doctors are fond of collecting such things. It had rolled out and lay near his head, and it was a remarkably fine skull, rather small, beautifully shaped and very white, with perfect teeth. That is to say, the upper jaw was perfect, but there was no lower one at all, when I first saw it.

Yes, I found it here when I came. You see, it was very white and polished, like a thing meant to be kept under a glass case, and the people did not know where it came from, nor what to do with it; so they put it back into the bandbox and set it on the shelf of the cupboard in the best bedroom, and of course they showed it to me when I took possession. I was taken down to the beach, too, to be shown the place where Luke was found, and the old fisherman explained just how he was lying, and the skull beside him. The only point he could not explain was why the skull had rolled up the sloping sand toward Luke's head instead of rolling downhill to his feet. It did not seem odd to me at the time, but I have often thought of it since, for the place is rather steep. I'll take you there tomorrow if you like—I made a sort of cairn of stones there afterward.

When he fell down, or was thrown down—whichever happened—the bandbox struck the sand, and the lid came off, and the thing came out and ought to have rolled down. But it didn't. It was close to his head, almost touching it, and turned with the face toward it. I say it didn't strike me as odd when the man told me, but I could not help thinking about it afterward, again and again, till I saw a picture of it all when I closed my eyes; and then I began to ask myself why the plaguey thing had rolled up instead of down, and why it had stopped near Luke's head instead of anywhere else, a yard away, for instance.

You naturally want to know what conclusion I reached, don't you? None that at all explained the rolling, at all events. But I got something else into my head, after a time, that made me feel downright uncomfortable.

Oh, I don't mean as to anything supernatural! There may be ghosts, or there may not be. If there are, I'm not inclined to believe

that they can hurt living people except by frightening them, and, for my part, I would rather face any shape of ghost than a fog in the Channel when it's crowded. No. What bothered me was just a foolish idea, that's all, and I cannot tell how it began, nor what made it grow till it turned into a certainty.

I was thinking about Luke and his poor wife one evening over my pipe and a dull book, when it occurred to me that the skull might possibly be hers, and I have never got rid of the thought since. You'll tell me there's no sense in it, no doubt, that Mrs. Pratt was buried like a Christian and is lying in the churchyard where they put her, and that it's perfectly monstrous to suppose her husband kept her skull in her old bandbox in his bedroom. All the same, in the face of reason, and common sense, and probability, I'm convinced that he did. Doctors do all sorts of queer things that would make men like you and me feel creepy, and those are just the things that don't seem probable, nor logical, nor sensible to us.

Then, don't you see?—if it really was her skull, poor woman, the only way of accounting for his having it is that he really killed her, and did it in that way, as the woman killed her husbands in the story, and that he was afraid there might be an examination some day which would betray him. You see, I told that too, and I believe it had really happened some fifty or sixty years ago. They dug up the three skulls, you know, and there was a small lump of lead rattling about in each one. That was what hanged the woman. Luke remembered that, I'm sure. I don't want to know what he did when he thought of it; my taste never ran in the direction of horrors, and I don't fancy you care for them either, do you? No, if you did, you might supply what is wanting to the story.

It must have been rather grim, eh? I wish I did not see the whole thing so distinctly, just as everything must have happened. He took it the night before she was buried, I'm sure, after the coffin had been shut, and when the servant girl was asleep. I would bet anything that when he'd got it, he put something under the sheet in its place, to fill up and look like it. What do you suppose he put there, under the sheet?

I don't wonder you take me up on what I'm saying! First I tell you that I don't want to know what happened, and that I hate to think about horrors, and then I describe the whole thing to you as if I had seen it. I'm quite sure that it was her workbag that he put there. I remember the bag very well, for she always used it of an evening; it was made of brown plush, and when it was stuffed it

was about the size of—you understand. Yes, there I am, at it again! You may laugh at me, but you don't live here alone, where it was done, and you didn't tell Luke the story about the melted lead. I'm not nervous, I tell you, but sometimes I begin to feel that I understand why some people are. I dwell on all this when I'm alone, and I dream of it, and when that thing screams—well, frankly, I don't like the noise any more than you do, though I should be used to it by this time.

I ought not to be nervous. I've sailed in a haunted ship. There was a Man in the Top, and two-thirds of the crew died of the West Coast fever inside of ten days after we anchored; but I was all right, then and afterward. I have seen some ugly sights, too, just as you have, and all the rest of us. But nothing ever stuck in my head in the way this does.

You see, I've tried to get rid of the thing, but it doesn't like that. It wants to be there in its place, in Mrs. Pratt's handbox in the cupboard in the best bedroom. It's not happy anywhere else. How do I know that? Because I've tried it. You don't suppose that I've not tried, do you? As long as it's there it only screams now and then, generally at this time of year, but if I put it out of the house it goes on all night, and no servant will stay here twenty-four hours. As it is, I've often been left alone and have been obliged to shift for myself for a fortnight at a time. No one from the village would ever pass a night under the roof now, and as for selling the place, or even letting it, that's out of the question. The old women say that if I stay here I shall come to a bad end myself before long.

I'm not afraid of that. You smile at the mere idea that anyone could take such nonsense seriously. Quite right. It's utterly blatant nonsense, I agree with you. Didn't I tell you that it's only a noise after all when you started and looked round as if you expected to see a ghost standing behind your chair?

I may be all wrong about the skull, and I like to think that I am—when I can. It may be just a fine specimen which Luke got somewhere long ago, and what rattles about inside when you shake it may be nothing but a pebble, or a bit of hard clay; or anything. Skulls that have lain long in the ground generally have something inside them that rattles, don't they? No, I've never tried to get it out, whatever it is; I'm afraid it might be lead, don't you see? And if it is, I don't want to know the fact, for I'd much rather not be sure. If it really is lead, I killed her quite as much as if I had done the deed myself. Anybody must see that, I should think. As long

as I don't know for certain, I have the consolation of saying that it's all utterly ridiculous nonsense, that Mrs. Pratt died a natural death and that the beautiful skull belonged to Luke when he was a student in London. But if I were quite sure, I believe I should have to leave the house; indeed I do, most certainly. As it is, I had to give up trying to sleep in the best bedroom where the cupboard is.

You ask me why I don't throw it into the pond—yes, but please don't call it a "confounded bugbear"—it doesn't like being called names.

There! Lord, what a shriek! I told you so! You're quite pale, man. Fill up your pipe and draw your chair nearer to the fire, and take some more drink. Old Hollands never hurt anybody yet. I've seen a Dutchman in Java drink half a jug of Hulstkamp in a morning without turning a hair. I don't take much rum myself, because it doesn't agree with my rheumatism, but you are not rheumatic and it won't damage you. Besides, it's a very damp night outside. The wind is howling again, and it will soon be in the southwest; do you hear how the windows rattle? The tide must have turned, too, by the moaning.

We should not have heard the thing again if you had not said that. I'm pretty sure we should not. Oh yes, if you choose to describe it as a coincidence, you are quite welcome, but I would rather you should not call the thing names again, if you don't mind. It may be that the poor little woman hears, and perhaps it hurts her, don't you know? Ghosts? You don't call anything a ghost that you can take in your hands and look at it in broad daylight, and that rattles when you shake it. Do you, now? But it's something that hears and understands; there's no doubt about that.

I tried sleeping in the best bedroom when I first came to the house, just because it was the best and most comfortable, but I had to give it up. It was their room, and there's the big bed she died in, and the cupboard is in the thickness of the wall, near the head, on the left. That's where it likes to be kept, in its bandbox. I only used the room for a fortnight after I came, and then I turned out and took the little room downstairs, next to the surgery, where Luke used to sleep when he expected to be called to a patient during the night.

I was always a good sleeper ashore; eight hours is my dose; eleven to seven when I'm alone, twelve to eight when I have a friend with me. But I could not sleep after three o'clock in the morning in that

room—a quarter past, to be accurate—as a matter of fact, I timed it with my old pocket chronometer, which still keeps good time, and it was always at exactly seventeen minutes past three. I wonder whether that was the hour when she died?

It was not what you have heard. If it had been that, I could not have stood it two nights. It was just a start and a moan and hard breathing for a few seconds in the cupboard, and it could never have waked me under ordinary circumstances, I'm sure. I suppose you are like me in that, and we are just like other people who have been to sea. No natural sounds disturb us at all, not all the racket of a square-rigger hove to in a heavy gale, or rolling on her beam ends before the wind. But if a lead pencil gets adrift and rattles in the drawer of your cabin table you are awake in a moment. Just so—you always understand. Very well, the noise in the cupboard was no louder than that, but it waked me instantly.

I said it was like a "start." I know what I mean, but it's hard to explain without seeming to talk nonsense. Of course you cannot exactly "hear" a person "start"; at the most, you might hear the quick drawing of the breath between the parted lips and closed teeth, and the almost imperceptible sound of clothing that moved suddenly though very slightly. It was like that.

You know how one feels what a sailing vessel is going to do, two or three seconds before she does it, when one has the wheel. Riders say the same of a horse, but that's less strange, because the horse is a live animal with feelings of its own, and only poets and landsmen talk about a ship being alive, and all that. But I have always felt somehow that besides being a steaming machine or a sailing machine for carrying weights, a vessel at sea is a sensitive instrument, and a means of communication between nature and man, and most particularly the man at the wheel, if she is steered by hand. She takes her impressions directly from wind and sea, tide and stream, and transmits them to the man's hand, just as the wireless telegraphy picks up the interrupted currents aloft and turns them out below in the form of a message.

You see what I am driving at; I felt that something started in the cupboard, and I felt it so vividly that I heard it, though there may have been nothing to hear, and the sound inside my head waked me suddenly. But I really heard the other noise. It was as if it were muffled inside a box, as far away as if it came through a long-distance telephone; and yet I knew that it was inside the cupboard near the head of my bed. My hair did not bristle and my

blood did not run cold that time. I simply resented being waked up by something that had no business to make a noise, any more than a pencil should rattle in the drawer of my cabin table on board ship. For I did not understand; I just supposed that the cupboard had some communication with the outside air, and that the wind had got in and was moaning through it with a sort of very faint screech. I struck a light and looked at my watch, and it was seventeen minutes past three. Then I turned over and went to sleep on my right ear. That's my good one; I'm pretty deaf with the other, for I struck the water with it when I was a lad in diving from the fore-topsail yard. Silly thing to do, it was, but the result is very convenient when I want to go to sleep when there's a noise.

That was the first night, and the same thing happened again and several times afterward, but not regularly, though it was always at the same time, to a second; perhaps I was sometimes sleeping on my good ear, and sometimes not. I overhauled the cupboard and there was no way by which the wind could get in, or anything else, for the door makes a good fit, having been meant to keep out moths, I suppose; Mrs. Pratt must have kept her winter things in it, for it still smells of camphor and turpentine.

After about a fortnight I had had enough of the noises. So far I had said to myself that it would be silly to yield to it and take the skull out of the room. Things always look differently by daylight, don't they? But the voice grew louder—I suppose one may call it a voice—and it got inside my deaf ear, too, one night. I realized that when I was wide awake, for my good ear was jammed down on the pillow, and I ought not to have heard a foghorn in that position. But I heard that, and it made me lose my temper, unless it scared me, for sometimes the two are not far apart. I struck a light and got up, and I opened the cupboard, grabbed the bandbox and threw it out of the window, as far as I could.

Then my hair stood on end. The thing screamed in the air, like a shell from a twelve-inch gun. It fell on the other side of the road. The night was very dark, and I could not see it fall, but I know it fell beyond the road. The window is just over the front door, it's fifteen yards to the fence, more or less, and the road is ten yards wide. There's a thickset hedge beyond, along the glebe that belongs to the vicarage.

I did not sleep much more that night. It was not more than half an hour after I had thrown the bandbox out when I heard a shriek outside—like what we've had tonight, but worse, more despairing,

I should call it; and it may have been my imagination, but I could have sworn that the screams came nearer and nearer each time. I lit a pipe, and walked up and down for a bit, and then took a book and sat up reading, but I'll be hanged if I can remember what I read nor even what the book was, for every now and then a shriek came up that would have made a dead man turn in his coffin.

A little before dawn someone knocked at the front door. There was no mistaking that for anything else, and I opened my window and looked down, for I guessed that someone wanted the doctor, supposing that the new man had taken Luke's house. It was rather a relief to hear a human knock after that awful noise.

You cannot see the door from above, owing to the little porch. The knocking came again, and I called out, asking who was there, but nobody answered, though the knock was repeated. I sang out again, and said that the doctor did not live here any longer. There was no answer, but it occurred to me that it might be some old countryman who was stone deaf. So I took my candle and went down to open the door. Upon my word, I was not thinking of the thing yet, and I had almost forgotten the other noises. I went down convinced that I should find somebody outside, on the doorstep, with a message. I set the candle on the hall table, so that the wind should not blow it out when I opened. While I was drawing the old fashioned bolt I heard the knocking again. It was not loud, and it had a queer, hollow sound, now that I was close to it, I remember, but I certainly thought it was made by some person who wanted to get in.

It wasn't. There was nobody there, but as I opened the door inward, standing a little on one side, so as to see out at once, something rolled across the threshold and stopped against my foot.

I drew back as I felt it, for I knew what it was before I looked down. I cannot tell you how I knew, and it seemed unreasonable, for I am quite sure that I had thrown it across the road. It's a french window, that opens wide, and I got a good swing when I flung it out. Besides, when I went out early in the morning, I found the handbox beyond the thick hedge.

You may think it opened when I threw it, and that the skull dropped out; but that's impossible, for nobody could throw an empty cardboard box so far. It's out of the question; you might as well try to fling a ball of paper twenty-five yards, or a blown bird's egg.

To go back, I shut and bolted the hall door, picked the thing up carefully, and put it on the table beside the candle. I did that

mechanically, as one instinctively does the right thing in danger without thinking at all—unless one does the opposite. It may seem odd, but I believe my first thought had been that somebody might come and find me there on the threshold while it was resting against my foot, lying a little on its side, and turning one hollow eye up at my face, as if it meant to accuse me. And the light and shadow from the candle played in the hollows of the eyes as it stood on the table, so that they seemed to open and shut at me. Then the candle went out quite unexpectedly, though the door was fastened and there was not the least draft; and I used up at least half a dozen matches before it would burn again.

I sat down rather suddenly, without quite knowing why. Probably I had been badly frightened, and perhaps you will admit there was no great shame in being scared. The thing had come home, and it wanted to go upstairs, back to its cupboard. I sat still and stared at it for a bit, till I began to feel very cold; then I took it and carried it up and set it in its place; and I remember that I spoke to it, and promised that it should have its bandbox again in the morning.

You want to know whether I stayed in the room till daybreak? Yes, but I kept a light burning, and sat up smoking and reading, most likely out of fright; plain, undeniable fear, and you need not call it cowardice either, for that's not the same thing. I could not have stayed alone with that thing in the cupboard; I should have been scared to death, though I'm not more timid than other people. Confound it all, man, it had crossed the road alone, and had got up the doorstep and had knocked to be let in.

When the dawn came, I put on my boots and went out to find the bandbox. I had to go a good way round, by the gate near the highroad, and I found the box open and hanging on the other side of the hedge. It had caught on the twigs by the string, and the lid had fallen off and was lying on the ground below it. That shows that it did not open till it was well over; and if it had not opened as soon as it left my hand, what was inside it must have gone beyond the road too.

That's all. I took the box upstairs to the cupboard, and put the skull back and locked it up. When the girl brought me my breakfast she said she was sorry, but that she must go, and she did not care if she lost her month's wages. I looked at her, and her face was a sort of greenish, yellowish white. I pretended to be surprised, and asked what was the matter; but that was of no use, for she just

turned on me and wanted to know whether I meant to stay in a haunted house, and how long I expected to live if I did, for though she noticed I was sometimes a little hard of hearing, she did not believe that even I could sleep through those screams again—and if I could, why had I been moving about the house and opening and shutting the front door, between three and four in the morning? There was no answering that, since she had heard me, so off she went, and I was left to myself. I went down to the village during the morning and found a woman who was willing to come and do the little work there is and cook my dinner, on condition that she might go home every night. As for me, I moved downstairs that day, and I have never tried to sleep in the best bedroom since. After a little while I got a brace of middle-aged Scotch servants from London, and things were quiet enough for a long time. I began by telling them that the house was in a very exposed position, and that the wind whistled round it a good deal in the autumn and winter, which had given it a bad name in the village, the Cornish people being inclined to superstition and telling ghost stories. The two hard-faced, sandy-haired sisters almost smiled, and they answered with great contempt that they had no great opinion of any Southern bogey whatever, having been in service in two English haunted houses, where they had never seen so much as the Boy in Gray, whom they reckoned no very particular rarity in Forfarshire.

They stayed with me several months, and while they were in the house we had peace and quiet. One of them is here again now, but she went away with her sister within the year. This one—she was the cook—married the sexton, who works in my garden. That's the way of it. It's a small village and he has not much to do, and he knows enough about flowers to help me nicely, besides doing most of the hard work; for though I'm fond of exercise, I'm getting a little stiff in the hinges. He's a sober, silent sort of fellow, who minds his own business, and he was a widower when I came here—Trehearn is his name, James Trehearn. The Scotch sisters would not admit that there was anything wrong about the house, but when November came they gave me warning that they were going, on the ground that the chapel was such a long walk from here, being in the next parish, and that they could not possibly go to our church. But the younger one came back in the spring, and as soon as the banns could be published she was married to James Trehearn by the vicar, and she seems to have had no scruples about

hearing him preach since then. I'm quite satisfied, if she is! The couple live in a small cottage that looks over the churchyard.

I suppose you are wondering what all this has to do with what I was talking about. I'm alone so much that when an old friend comes to see me, I sometimes go on talking just for the sake of hearing my own voice. But in this case there is really a connection of ideas. It was James Trehearn who buried poor Mrs. Pratt, and her husband after her in the same grave, and it's not far from the back of his cottage. That's the connection in my mind, you see. It's plain enough. He knows something; I'm quite sure that he does, though he's such a reticent beggar.

Yes, I'm alone in the house at night now, for Mrs. Trehearn does everything herself, and when I have a friend the sexton's niece comes in to wait on the table. He takes his wife home every evening in winter, but in summer, when there's light, she goes by herself. She's not a nervous woman, but she's less sure than she used to be that there are no bogies in England worth a Scotchwoman's notice. Isn't it amusing, the idea that Scotland has a monopoly of the supernatural? Odd sort of national pride, I call that, don't you?

That's a good fire, isn't it? When driftwood gets started at last there's nothing like it, I think. Yes, we get lots of it, for I'm sorry to say there are still a great many wrecks about here. It's a lonely coast, and you may have all the wood you want for the trouble of bringing it in. Trehearn and I borrow a cart now and then, and load it between here and the Spit. I hate a coal fire when I can get wood of any sort. A log is company, even if it's only a piece of a deck beam or timber sawn off, and the salt in it makes pretty sparks. See how they fly, like Japanese hand-fireworks! Upon my word, with an old friend and a good fire and a pipe, one forgets all about that thing upstairs, especially now that the wind has moderated. It's only a lull, though, and it will blow a gale before morning.

You think you would like to see the skull? I've no objection. There's no reason why you shouldn't have a look at it, and you never saw a more perfect one in your life, except that there are two front teeth missing in the lower jaw.

Oh yes—I had not told you about the jaw yet. Trehearn found it in the garden last spring when he was digging a pit for a new asparagus bed. You know we make asparagus beds six or eight feet deep here. Yes, yes—I had forgotten to tell you that. He was digging straight down, just as he digs a grave; if you want a good asparagus

bed made, I advise you to get a sexton to make it for you. Those fellows have a wonderful knack at that sort of digging.

Trehearn had got down about three feet when he cut into a mass of white lime in the side of the trench. He had noticed that the earth was a little looser there, though he says it had not been disturbed for a number of years. I suppose he thought that even old lime might not be good for asparagus, so he broke it out and threw it up. It was pretty hard, he says, in biggish lumps, and out of sheer force of habit he cracked the lumps with his spade as they lay outside the pit beside him; the jawbone of a skull dropped out of one of the pieces. He thinks he must have knocked out the two front teeth in breaking up the lime, but he did not see them anywhere. He's a very experienced man in such things, as you may imagine, and he said at once that the jaw had probably belonged to a young woman, and that the teeth had been complete when she died. He brought it to me, and asked me if I wanted to keep it; if I did not, he said he would drop it into the next grave he made in the churchyard, as he supposed it was a Christian jaw, and ought to have decent burial, wherever the rest of the body might be. I told him that doctors often put bones into quicklime to whiten them nicely, and that I supposed Dr. Pratt had once had a little lime pit in the garden for that purpose, and had forgotten the jaw. Trehearn looked at me quietly.

"Maybe it fitted that skull that used to be in the cupboard upstairs, sir," he said. "Maybe Dr. Pratt had put the skull into the lime to clean it, or something, and when he took it out he left the lower jaw behind. There's some human hair sticking in the lime, sir."

I saw there was, and that was what Trehearn said. If he did not suspect something, why in the world should he have suggested that the jaw might fit the skull? Besides, it did. That's proof that he knows more than he cares to tell. Do you suppose he looked before she was buried? Or perhaps—when he buried Luke in the same grave—

Well, well, it's of no use to go over that, is it? I said I would keep the jaw with the skull, and I took it upstairs and fitted it into its place. There's not the slightest doubt about the two belonging together, and together they are.

Trehearn knows several things. We were talking about plastering the kitchen a while ago, and he happened to remember that it had not been done since the very week when Mrs. Pratt died. He

did not say that the mason must have left some lime on the place, but he thought it, and that it was the very same lime he had found in the asparagus pit. He knows a lot. Trehearn is one of your silent beggars who can put two and two together. That grave is very near the back of his cottage, too, and he's one of the quickest men with a spade I ever saw. If he wanted to know the truth, he could, and no one else would ever be the wiser unless he chose to tell. In a quiet village like ours, people don't go and spend the night in the churchyard to see whether the sexton potters about by himself between ten o'clock and daylight.

What is awful to think of is Luke's deliberation, if he did it; his cool certainty that no one would find him out; above all, his nerve, for that must have been extraordinary. I sometimes think it's bad enough to live in the place where it was done, if it really was done. I always put in the condition, you see, for the sake of his memory, and a little bit for my own sake, too.

I'll go upstairs and fetch the box in a minute. Let me light my pipe; there's no hurry! We had supper early, and it's only half past nine o'clock. I never let a friend go to bed before twelve, or with less than three glasses—you may have as many more as you like, but you shan't have less, for the sake of old times.

It's breezing up again, do you hear? That was only a lull just now, and we are going to have a bad night.

A thing happened that made me start a little when I found that the jaw fitted exactly. I'm not very easily startled in that way myself, but I have seen people make a quick movement, drawing their breath sharply, when they had thought they were alone and suddenly turned and saw someone very near them. Nobody can call that fear. You wouldn't, would you? No. Well, just when I had set the jaw in its place under the skull, the teeth closed sharply on my finger. It felt exactly as if it were biting me hard, and I confess that I jumped before I realized that I had been pressing the jaw and the skull together with my other hand. I assure you I was not at all nervous. It was broad daylight, too, and a fine day, and the sun was streaming into the best bedroom. It would have been absurd to be nervous, and it was only a quick mistaken impression, but it really made me feel queer. Somehow it made me think of the funny verdict of the coroner's jury on Luke's death, "by the hand or teeth of some person or animal unknown." Ever since that I've wished I had seen those marks on his throat, though the lower jaw was missing then.

I have often seen a man do insane things with his hands that he does not realize at all. I once saw a man hanging on by an old awning stop with one hand, leaning backward, outboard, with all his weight on it, and he was just cutting the stop with the knife in his other hand when I got my arms round him. We were in mid-ocean, going twenty knots. He had not the smallest idea what he was doing; neither had I when I managed to pinch my finger between the teeth of that thing. I can feel it now. It was exactly as if it were alive and were trying to bite me. It would if it could, for I know it hates me, poor thing! Do you suppose that what rattles about inside is really a bit of lead? Well, I'll get the box down presently, and if whatever it is happens to drop out into your hands that's your affair. If it's only a clod of earth or a pebble, the whole matter would be off my mind, and I don't believe I should ever think of the skull again; but somehow I cannot bring myself to shake out the bit of hard stuff myself. The mere idea that it may be lead makes me confoundedly uncomfortable, yet I've got the conviction that I shall know before long, I shall certainly know. I'm sure Trehearn knows, but he's such a silent beggar.

I'll go upstairs now and get it. What? You had better go with me? Ha, ha! do you think I'm afraid of a bandbox and a noise? Nonsense!

Bother the candle, it won't light! As if the ridiculous thing understood what it's wanted for! Look at that—the third match. They light fast enough for my pipe. There, do you see? It's a fresh box, just out of the tin safe where I keep the supply on account of the dampness. Oh, you think the wick of the candle may be damp, do you? All right, I'll light the beastly thing in the fire. That won't go out, at all events. Yes, it sputters a bit, but it will keep lighted now. It burns just like any other candle, doesn't it? The fact is, candles are not very good about here. I don't know where they come from, but they have a way of burning low occasionally, with a greenish flame that spits tiny sparks, and I'm often annoyed by their going out of themselves. It cannot be helped, for it will be long before we have electricity in our village. It really is rather a poor light, isn't it?

You think I had better leave you the candle and take the lamp, do you? I don't like to carry lamps about, that's the truth. I never dropped one in my life, but I have always thought I might, and it's so confoundedly dangerous if you do. Besides, I am pretty well used to these rotten candles by this time.

You may as well finish that glass while I'm getting it, for I don't mean to let you off with less than three before you go to bed. You won't have to go upstairs, either, for I've put you in the old study next to the surgery—that's where I live myself. The fact is, I never ask a friend to sleep upstairs now. The last man who did was Crackenthorpe, and he said he was kept awake all night. You remember old Crack, don't you? He stuck to the service, and they've just made him an admiral. Yes, I'm off now—unless the candle goes out. I couldn't help asking if you remember Crackenthorpe. If anyone had told us that the skinny little idiot he used to be was to turn out the most successful of the lot of us, we should have laughed at the idea, shouldn't we? You and I did not do badly, it's true—but I'm really going now. I don't mean to let you think that I've been putting it off by talking! As if there were anything to be afraid of! If I were scared, I should tell you so quite frankly, and get you to go upstairs with me.

Here's the box. I brought it down very carefully, so as not to disturb it, poor thing. You see, if it were shaken, the jaw might get separated from it again, and I'm sure it wouldn't like that. Yes, the candle went out as I was coming downstairs, but that was the draught from the leaky window on the landing. Did you hear anything? Yes, there was another scream. Am I pale, do you say? That's nothing. My heart is a little queer sometimes, and I went upstairs too fast. In fact, that's one reason why I really prefer to live altogether on the ground floor.

Wherever that shriek came from, it was not from the skull, for I had the box in my hand when I heard the noise, and here it is now; so we have proved definitely that the screams are produced by something else. I've no doubt I shall find out some day what makes them. Some crevice in the wall, of course, or a crack in a chimney, or a chink in the frame of a window. That's the way all ghosts stories end in real life. Do you know, I'm jolly glad I thought of going up and bringing it down for you to see, for that last shriek settled the question. To think that I should have been so weak as to fancy that the poor skull could really cry out like a living thing!

Now, I'll open the box, and we'll take it out and look at it under the bright light. It's rather awful to think that the poor lady used to sit there, in your chair, evening after evening, in just the same light, isn't it? But then—I've made up my mind that it's all rubbish

from beginning to end, and that it's just an old skull that Luke had when he was a student; and perhaps he put it into the lime merely to whiten it, and could not find the jaw.

I made a seal on the string, you see, after I had put the jaw in its place, and I wrote on the cover. There's the old white label on it still, from the milliner's, addressed to Mrs. Pratt when the hat was sent to her, and as there was room I wrote on the edge: "A skull, once the property of the late Luke Pratt, M.D." I don't quite know why I wrote that, unless it was with the idea of explaining how the thing happened to be in my possession. I cannot help wondering sometimes what sort of hat it was that came in the bandbox. What color was it, do you think? Was it a gay spring hat with a bobbing feather and pretty ribands? Strange that the very same box should hold the head that wore the finery—perhaps. No—we made up our minds that it just came from the hospital in London where Luke did his time. It's far better to look at it in that light, isn't it? There's no more connection between that skull and poor Mrs. Pratt than there was between my story about the lead and—

Good Lord! Take the lamp—don't let it go, out, if you can help it—I'll have the window fastened again in a second—I say, what a gale! There, it's out! I told you so! Never mind, there's the fire-light—I've got the window shut—the bolt was only half down. Was the box blown off the table? Where the deuce is it? There! That won't open again, for I've put up the bar. Good dodge, an old fashioned bar—there's nothing like it. Now, you find the bandbox while I light the lamp. Confound those wretched matches! Yes, a pipe spill is better—it must light in the fire—I hadn't thought of it—thank you—there we are again. Now, where's the box? Yes, put it back on the table, and we'll open it.

That's the first time I have ever known the wind to burst that window open; but it was partly carelessness on my part when I last shut it. Yes, of course, I heard the scream. It seemed to go all round the house before it broke in at the window. That proves that it's always been the wind and nothing else, doesn't it? When it was not the wind, it was my imagination. I've always been a very imaginative man: I must have been, though I did not know it. As we grow older we understand ourselves better, don't you know?

I'll have a drop of the Hulstkamp neat, by way of an exception, since you are filling up your glass. That damp gust chilled me, and

with my rheumatic tendency I'm very much afraid of a chill, for the cold sometimes seems to stick in my joints all winter when it once gets in.

By George, that's good stuff! I'll just light a fresh pipe, now that everything is snug again, and then we'll open the box. I'm so glad we heard that last scream together, with the skull here on the table between us for a thing cannot possibly be in two places at the same time, and the noise most certainly came from outside, as any noise the wind makes must. You thought you heard it scream through the room after the window was burst open? Oh yes, so did I, but that was natural enough when everything was open. Of course we heard the wind. What could one expect?

Look here, please. I want you to see that the seal is intact before we open the box together. Will you take my glasses? No, you have your own. All right. The seal is sound, you see, and you can read the words of the motto easily. "Sweet and low"—that's it—because the poem goes on "Wind of the Western Sea," and says, "blow him again to me," and all that. Here is the seal on my watch chain, where it's hung for more than forty years. My poor little wife gave it to me when I was courting, and I never had any other. It was just like her to think of those words—she was always fond of Tennyson.

It's of no use to cut the string, for it's fastened to the box, so I'll just break the wax, and untie the knot, and afterward we'll seal it up again. You see, I like to feel that the thing is safe in its place, and that nobody can take it out. Not that I should suspect Trehearn of meddling with it, but I always feel that he knows a lot more than he tells.

You see, I've managed it without breaking the string, though when I fastened it I never expected to open the bandbox again. The lid comes off easily enough. There! Now look!

What? Nothing in it? Empty? It's gone, man, the skull is gone!

No, there's nothing the matter with me. I'm only trying to collect my thoughts. It's so strange. I'm positively certain that it was inside when I put on the seal last spring. I can't have imagined that; it's utterly impossible. If I ever took a stiff glass with a friend now and then, I would admit that I might have made some idiotic mistake when I had taken too much. But I don't, and I never did. A pint of ale at supper and half a go of rum at bedtime was the most I ever took in my good days. I believe it's always we sober fellows who get rheumatism and gout! Yet there was my seal, and

there is the empty bandbox. That's plain enough.

I say, I don't half like this. It's not right. There's something wrong about it, in my opinion. You needn't talk to me about supernatural manifestations, for I don't believe in them, not a little bit! Somebody must have tampered with the seal and stolen the skull. Sometimes, when I go out to work in the garden in summer, I leave my watch and chain on the table. Trehearn must have taken the seal then, and used it, for he would be quite sure that I should not come in for at least an hour.

If it was not Trehearn—oh, don't talk to me about the possibility that the thing has got out by itself! If it has, it must be somewhere about the house, in some out-of-the-way corner, waiting. We may come upon it anywhere, waiting for us, don't you know—just waiting in the dark. Then it will scream at me; it will shriek at me in the dark, for it hates me, I tell you!

The bandbox is quite empty. We are not dreaming, either of us. There, I turn it upside down.

What's that? Something fell out as I turned it over. It's on the floor, it's near your feet, I know it is, and we must find it. Help me to find it, man. Have you got it? For God's sake, give it to me, quickly!

Lead! I knew it when I heard it fall. I knew it couldn't be anything else by the little thud it made on the hearthrug. So it was lead after all, and Luke did it.

I feel a little bit shaken up—not exactly nervous, you know, but badly shaken up, that's the fact. Anybody would, I should think. After all, you cannot say that it's fear of the thing, for I went up and brought it down—at least, I believed I was bringing it down, and that's the same thing, and by George, rather than give in to such silly nonsense, I'll take the box upstairs again and put it back in its place. It's not that. It's the certainty that the poor little woman came to her end in that way, by my fault, because I told the story. That's what is so dreadful. Somehow, I had always hoped that I should never be quite sure of it, but there is no doubting it now. Look at that!

Look at it! That little lump of lead with no particular shape. Think of what it did, man! Doesn't it make you shiver? He gave her something to make her sleep, of course, but there must have been one moment of awful agony. Think of having boiling lead poured into your brain. Think of it. She was dead before she could scream, but only think of—oh! there it is again—it's just outside—I

know it's just outside—I can't keep it out of my head!—oh!—oh!—oh!

You thought I had fainted? No, I wish I had, for it would have stopped sooner. It's all very well to say that it's only a noise, and that a noise would never hurt anybody—you're as white as a shroud yourself. There's only one thing to be done, if we hope to close an eye tonight. We must find it and put it back into its bandbox and shut it up in the cupboard, where it likes to be. I don't know how it got out, but it wants to get in again. That's why it screams so awfully tonight—it was never so bad as this—never since I first—

Bury it? Yes, if we can find it, we'll bury it, if it takes us all night. We'll bury it six feet deep and ram down the earth over it, so that it shall never get out again, and if it screams, we shall hardly hear it so deep down. Quick, we'll get the lantern and look for it. It cannot be far away; I'm sure it's just outside—it was coming in when I shut the window, I know it.

Yes, you're quite right. I'm losing my senses, and I must get hold of myself. Don't speak to me for a minute or two; I'll sit quite still and keep my eyes shut and repeat something I know. That's the best way.

"Add together the altitude, the latitude, and the polar distance, divide by two and subtract the altitude from the half-sum; then add the logarithm of the secant of the latitude, the cosecant of the polar distance, the cosine of the half-sum and the sine of the half-sum minus the altitude"—there! Don't say that I'm out of my senses, for my memory is all right, isn't it?

Of course, you may say that it's mechanical, and that we never forget the things we learned when we were boys and have used almost every day for a lifetime. But that's the very point. When a man is going crazy, it's the mechanical part of his mind that gets out of order and won't work right; he remembers things that never happened, or he sees things that aren't real, or he hears noises when there is perfect silence. That's not what is the matter with either of us, is it?

Come, we'll get the lantern and go round the house. It's not raining—only blowing like old boots, as we used to say. The lantern is in the cupboard under the stairs in the hall, and I always keep it trimmed in case of a wreck.

No use to look for the thing? I don't see how you can say that. It was nonsense to talk of burying it, of course, for it doesn't want

to be buried; it wants to go back into its handbox and be taken upstairs, poor thing! Trehearn took it out, I know, and made the seal over again. Perhaps he took it to the churchyard, and he may have meant well. I daresay he thought that it would not scream any more if it were quietly laid in consecrated ground, near where it belongs. But it has come home. Yes, that's it. He's not half a bad fellow, Trehearn, and rather religiously inclined, I think. Does not that sound natural, and reasonable, and well meant? He supposed it screamed because it was not decently buried—with the rest. But he was wrong. How should he know that it screams at me because it hates me, and because it's my fault that there was that little lump of lead in it?

No use to look for it, anyhow? Nonsense! I tell you it wants to be found—Hark! what's that knocking? Do you hear it? Knock—knock—knock—three times, then a pause, and then again. It has a hollow sound, hasn't it?

It has come home. I've heard that knock before. It wants to come in and be taken upstairs, in its box. It's at the front door.

Will you come with me? We'll take it in. Yes, I own that I don't like to go alone and open the door. The thing will roll in and stop against my foot, just as it did before, and the light will go out. I'm a good deal shaken by finding that bit of lead, and, besides, my heart isn't quite right—too much strong tobacco, perhaps. Besides, I'm quite willing to own that I'm a bit nervous tonight, if I never was before in my life.

That's right, come along! I'll take the box with me, so as not to come back. Do you hear the knocking? It's not like any other knocking I ever heard. If you will hold this door open, I can find the lantern under the stairs by the light from this room without bringing the lamp into the hall—it would only go out.

The thing knows we are coming—hark! It's impatient to get in. Don't shut the door till the lantern is ready, whatever you do. There will be the usual trouble with the matches, I suppose—no, the first one, by Jove! I tell you it wants to get in, so there's no trouble. All right with that door now; shut it, please. Now come and hold the lantern, for it's blowing so hard outside that I shall have to use both hands. That's it, hold the light low. Do you hear the knocking still? Here goes—I'll open just enough with my foot against the bottom of the door—now!

Catch it! It's only the wind that blows it across the floor, that's

all—there's half a hurricane outside, I tell you! Have you got it? The bandbox is on the table. One minute, and I'll have the bar up. There!

Why did you throw it into the box so roughly? It doesn't like that, you know.

What do you say? Bitten your hand? Nonsense, man! You did just what I did. You pressed the jaws together with your other hand and pinched yourself. Let me see. You don't mean to say you have drawn blood? You must have squeezed hard, by Jove, for the skin is certainly torn. I'll give you some carbolic solution for it before we go to bed, for they say a scratch from a skull's tooth may go bad and give trouble.

Come inside again and let me see it by the lamp. I'll bring the bandbox—never mind the lantern, it may just as well burn in the hall, for I shall need it presently when I go up the stairs. Yes, shut the door if you will; it makes it more cheerful and bright. Is your finger still bleeding? I'll get you the carbolic in an instant; just let me see the thing.

Ugh! There's a drop of blood on the upper jaw. It's on the eyetooth. Ghastly, isn't it? When I saw it running along the floor of the hall, the strength almost went out of my hands, and I felt my knees bending; then I understood that it was the gale, driving it over the smooth boards. You don't blame me? No, I should think not! We were boys together, and we've seen a thing or two, and we may just as well own to each other that we were both in a beastly funk when it slid across the floor at you. No wonder you pinched your finger picking it up, after that, if I did the same thing out of sheer nervousness, in broad daylight, with the sun streaming in on me.

Strange that the jaw should stick to it so closely, isn't it? I suppose it's the dampness, for it shuts like a vise—I have wiped off the drop of blood, for it was not nice to look at. I'm not going to try to open the jaws, don't be afraid! I shall not play any tricks with the poor thing, but I'll just seal the box again, and we'll take it upstairs and put it away where it wants to be. The wax is on the writing table by the window. Thank you. It will be long before I leave my seal lying about again, for Trehearn to use, I can tell you. Explain? I don't explain natural phenomena, but if you choose to think that Trehearn had hidden it somewhere in the bushes, and that the gale blew it to the house against the door, and made it knock, as if it wanted to be let in, you're not thinking the impossible, and I'm quite ready to agree with you.

Do you see that? You can swear that you've actually seen me seal it this time, in case anything of the kind should occur again. The wax fastens the strings to the lid, which cannot possibly be lifted, even enough to get in one finger. You're quite satisfied, aren't you? Yes. Besides, I shall lock the cupboard and keep the key in my pocket hereafter.

Now we can take the lantern and go upstairs. Do you know I'm very inclined to agree with your theory that the wind blew it against the house. I'll go ahead, for I know the stairs; just hold the lantern near my feet as we go up. How the wind howls and whistles! Did you feel the sand on the floor under your shoes as we crossed the hall?

Yes—this is the door of the best bedroom. Hold up the lantern, please. This side, by the head of the bed. I left the cupboard open when I got the box. Isn't it queer how the faint odor of women's dresses will hang about an old closet for years? This is the shelf. You've seen me set the box there, and now you see me turn the key and put it into my pocket. So that's done!

Goodnight. Are you sure you're quite comfortable? It's not much of a room, but I daresay you would as soon sleep here as upstairs tonight. If you want anything, sing out; there's only a lath and plaster partition between us. There's not so much wind on this side by half. There's the Hollands on the table, if you'll have one more nightcap. No? Well, do as you please. Goodnight, again, and don't dream about that thing, if you can.

The following paragraph appeared in the *Penraddon News*, 23rd November, 1906:

MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF A RETIRED SEA CAPTAIN

"The village of Tredcombe is much disturbed by the strange death of Captain Charles Braddock, and all sorts of impossible stories are circulating with regard to the circumstances, which certainly seem difficult of explanation. The retired captain, who had successfully commanded in his time the largest and fastest liners belonging to one of the principal transatlantic steamship companies, was found dead in his bed on Tuesday morning in his own cottage, a quarter of a mile from the village. An examination was

made at once by the local practitioner, which revealed the horrible fact that the deceased had been bitten in the throat by a human assailant, with such amazing force as to crush the windpipe and cause death. The marks of the teeth of both jaws were so plainly visible on the skin that they could be counted, for the perpetrator of the deed had evidently lost the two lower middle incisors. It is hoped that this peculiarity may help to identify the murderer, who can only be a dangerous escaped maniac. The deceased, though over sixty-five years of age, is said to have been a hale man of considerable physical strength, and it is remarkable that no signs of any struggle were visible in the room, nor could it be ascertained how the murderer had entered the house. Warning has been sent to all the insane asylums in the United Kingdom, but as yet no information has been received regarding the escape of any dangerous patient.

"The coroner's jury returned the somewhat singular verdict that Captain Braddock came to his death 'by the hands or teeth of some person unknown.' The local surgeon is said to have expressed privately the opinion that the maniac is a woman, a view he deduces from the small size of the jaws, as shown by the marks of the teeth. The whole affair is shrouded in mystery. Captain Braddock was a widower, and lived alone. He leaves no children."

(AUTHOR'S NOTE—Students of ghost lore and haunted houses will find the foundation of the foregoing story in the legends about a skull which is still preserved in the farmhouse called Bettiscombe Manor, situated, I believe, on the Dorsetshire coast.)

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

Arnott is "Prospero," Brisk is "Alba," Cellini is "Thunderer," Dacres is "Jove," Ewart is "Magnus."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Rosemary Herbert

ROBERT BARNARD

British author Robert Barnard's reputation and following have swelled with the publication of each new book, and deservedly so. Some of his books, such as the wickedly witty *Death of a Perfect Mother*, serve up characters in one-time-only appearances. Inspector Fagermo stars in *Murder on the Rocks*, and he's well worth meeting one of these days. But in this column we're primarily concerned with sleuths who star in their own series of mysteries. The oversized Scotland Yard superintendent Perry Trethowan aptly qualifies in this category.

Death by Sheer Torture introduced Trethowan in 1981, and immediately placed the hero in a most uncomfortable spot. Perry (still called "Peregrine"

by his aging aunts) is informed by his superior at the Yard that his estranged father has died, apparently the victim of his own too-authentic torture machine. This doesn't surprise Trethowan much: his father's kinky tastes were the final straw, and the reason for the quarrel, that produced their break. The problem is, so the superior explains, a neatly cut cord. Was it suicide—or murder? And surely Trethowan will return to the family manse to assist the investigator . . . ?

Thus we meet Perry Trethowan, all six feet five of him, whose desire to enter the army (and then later to join the police force) marked him as a prodigal in a wealthy family of minor artistic lights (and major artistic pretensions). He's a C.I.D.

detective-inspector already, looking forward to promotion to superintendent, and a most unwilling returnee to Harpenden House where he was reared. He narrates this very personal murder investigation, as he does his subsequent tales, with a bright and very droll voice.

I strongly recommend beginning with *Death by Sheer Torture*, the title stolen from the phrase Perry uses to describe the whole ghastly business from his point of view. He is deeply chagrined by the manner of his father's death, and doggedly depressed by the prospect of having to ferret out a murderer from among his closest family members. To make matters worse, his curious wife Jan shows up with their young son Daniel in tow. Through it all, Trethowan is clever and amusingly self-deprecating, very conscious of the bad publicity the case will generate and the endless razzing he will have to tolerate for it. But Perry Trethowan is also a very good cop—and a very good sport.

He is still living down his eccentric family's peccadilloes in his next recorded case, *Death and the Princess*. This one's a delight on several planes. For one thing, at the heart of the matter is the young and absolutely irresistible Princess Helena, a minor member of the British royal family whose

beauty earns her more press coverage than her duty visits to nursing homes—or even her private life in Buckingham Palace—would ordinarily deserve. Trethowan is asked to uncover a plot that apparently has the princess at its center, though who or what is behind it is a total mystery. There isn't much to go on at first: the apparent accidental death of a young reporter whom the princess had been favoring, and then the suicide (perhaps a little too obvious, though) of the princess's fussy little private secretary. Wife Jan pesters Perry unmercifully for all the details of this official detail, such as what the princess wears when she's at home, and most of us would agree with Jan that a behind-the-scenes peek at Buckingham Palace is definitely worth the price of admission to this paperback. Other delights are Perry's asides and his creator's comments on Britain and its inhabitants, as when Perry is encouraging the palace security man to pick a new secretary for the willful princess. "Strong-minded, determined, impervious to feminine charms. There is such a person," claims the security officer, "only she happens at the moment to be Prime Minister."

The next book dealt with *The Case of the Missing Brontë*, and is centered around a newly dis-

covered Brontë manuscript and the brutal beating of the retired schoolteacher who was unlucky enough to unearth the treasure. Perry's wife Jan, who was in on events before they turned into a criminal case, is closely involved with this one. The scene of the crime is a Yorkshire village near the Trethowan family home, where Perry and family had been spending their vacation. Once again, the mystery is a rousing one, and the narration is stylish, witty, and very intelligent.

The most recent addition to the Trethowan canon is *Bodies*, published last fall in hardcover (Charles Scribner's Sons, \$13.95, 198 pp.). The setting this time is the colorful and bohemian area of London called Soho. The title of the book comes from the name of a glossy magazine, a "very very soft" porn magazine composed primarily of photographs of young men and women in non-erotic poses. The editorial content, such as it is, is strong on health and bodybuilding information. In fact, many of the models employed

by the magazine's photographer are also part of the bodybuilding circuit. "Bodies" is also what was found one morning in the photography studio—four of them, in fact, all quite dead. And the investigation leads Perry to the gyms and contests and bodybuilding exhibitions, to the training sessions and the sometimes sleazy jobs the young people take to pay for their gym time. As always, Perry's style is punchy, strong on dialogue, almost pithy. Like the two middle novels, *Bodies* may not really give the reader enough clues to solve the mystery along with Perry, which is only to say that puzzle fans might not find as much to like in Barnard's plots as they do in his lively style and strong characterization.

That's the lineup to date, four Perry Trethowan mysteries by a three-time Edgar nominee. The three early books are all available in paperback editions from Dell books at \$3.50, and perhaps *Bodies* will soon be out in paperback, too. Pick all four up, and keep your fingers crossed for more.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

A complicated plot marks Richard Fliegel's *The Next To Die* (Bantam, \$2.95, 217 pp.), which stars NYPD cop Shelly Lowenkopf. He's a loner whose divorce has separated him from his son; he's an average cop cursed with a super-cop partner. The story opens when Shelly chases a kid who's just stolen his car battery and run up onto a roof—where the kid literally takes a flying leap six stories down. To take the heat off him, his superior ships Shelly off to

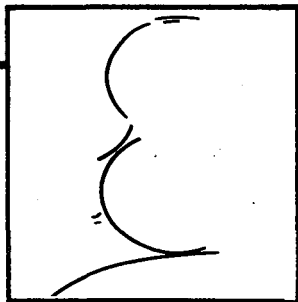
L.A., where culture shock seems to have jarred his senses so badly that he's hallucinating. He begins to fall in love, and he finds himself the prime suspect in a murder case. He finds a scared Arab wearing argyles in his bathtub, and he's seduced by a film queen. When he returns to New York to testify at the grand jury hearing of a mobster, his whole testimony is discounted due to his recent bizarre L.A. experiences. If you're looking for something different in the police procedural, try this one. There are some surprises, and the ending is a bit downbeat, but Fliegel has presented a credible picture of ruthlessness and betrayal, with an unpredictable pocket of fierce loyalty.

Max Allan Collins has capitalized on the recent craze for mystery weekends in **A Nice Weekend for Murder**, the latest Mallory novel (Walker, \$15.95, 190 pp.), and it's almost as much fun as going to one of the events yourself. This one is set at Mohonk Mountain House, an actual resort in upstate New York that is, I believe, the site of the very first mystery weekend ever held. At any rate, this weekend is peopled by Collins' characters, all—like Mallory—mystery writers of some renown. At least, all the suspects are being played by writers; the team members are hotel guests, and the victim is being played by a nasty mystery critic. You won't be surprised when the "victim" truly becomes the victim, but there are lots of other surprises in store for you, and it's fun to get the inside dope on what a mystery weekend is really like. One would assume, naturally, that real-life mystery weekends are *sans* real murders, though.

Something unconventional and quite special is Ray Bradbury's **Death Is a Lonely Business**, now out in paperback (Bantam, \$3.95, 216 pp.). The hero is a young, aspiring writer, much like the young Bradbury must have been; the time is several decades past; the place is Venice, California. There is murder in the plot, but the book is actually about the death of old Venice, the end of an era once marked by the noise and lights of the amusement pier, now a crumbling, abandoned ghetto for the losers and lonelies of the town. In clear-cut vignettes Bradbury makes a collage of that period and the young man who grew up in it; faces shine out, sights and smells grab hold of the reader. The edges—the basic plot—fuzzier, out of focus, an existential frame on which the cutouts are placed. Read this for mood, for atmosphere, for the joy of reading an outstandingly imaginative author.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



In **Black Widow** Theresa Russell plays Catharine, a beautiful and accomplished serial murderess who seduces older men, marries them, and inherits their fortunes by arranging for them to die seemingly natural deaths. Debra Winger plays Alexandra, a Justice Department investigator who notices an unusual pattern of deaths from "Undine's Curse," a sudden cessation of breathing while asleep that can occur naturally but also can be brought on by poison. Winger obtains photos of the supposedly different wives of the dead men and sees that they are probably the same woman: Catharine.

Like the black widow spider, Catharine widows herself by killing her mates. She cannot be said literally to devour them, as the spider does, but her favorite killing tool is a hypodermic needle filled with poison. (Her method also recalls the

water nymph Undine, who bestows a fatal kiss on the human who has been so foolhardy as to fall in love with her and marry her.)

When Debra Winger cannot persuade the authorities that a series of murders is in progress, she becomes obsessed with Catharine. Winger resigns from her job and sets out to track the killer. Actually her evidence is pretty good, so that it hardly seems credible when a Seattle chief of detectives rebuffs her after he has been witness to a third killing that takes place exactly as she predicted. More credible is Winger's obsession with the killer, who is everything she is not—seductive, manipulative, self-confident, ruthless. But the psychology starts to get murky once Winger catches up with her woman.

By this time Theresa Russell has staked out another victim, a hotel developer in Hawaii

played by the dark, maturely goodlooking French actor, Sami Frey. Winger proceeds to get close to both Russell and Frey, at which point detection is put aside and the movie slows down to a walk. Her sexuality awakened by Russell's, Winger falls in love with Sami Frey; in her turn, Russell seems to fall in love with Winger. When she recognizes that Winger is pursuing her, she invokes Undine's Curse yet again by cutting off Winger's scuba-diving air supply. At the last instant, though, she relents and saves Winger's life. Frey marries Russell, thus setting himself up to be the next victim. But nothing really comes of all the sexual byplay and hints of forbidden passions.

By the time the movie gets

back on track, a lot of time has been wasted, and things have to be hastily wrapped up by a trick ending. Winger has spun her own elaborate web to catch the black widow, but there isn't time to let the audience in on the details. Instead, Winger's plan has to be reconstructed on the way out of the theater, and even then not everything makes sense. By pulling together *Black Widow's* loose ends so hastily, the producers waste some excellent performances.

The English actor Nicol Williamson plays one of Russell's husbands. He captures the sentimental vulnerability of a bachelor museum expert who can be taken in by Theresa Russell's quick study of a few paperbacks on his beloved Northwest Indians. Russell herself shifts beautifully from pretending to be second husband Dennis Hopper's coarse, southern-gal soulmate, to being Williamson's sensitive, nature loving companion. And Debra Winger, partly reprising her career girl role in *Legal Eagles*, transforms herself from an office-bound, unromantic grind to a spunky adventuress testing her mettle in the field as an amateur sleuth. The acting comes close to saving *Black Widow*, but it can't quite make up for the disappointment of the hasty windup.



The *Black Widow* (Theresa Russell) and her hypodermic.

THE STORY THAT WON



The January Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Teresa Marie Black of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Honorable mentions go to Frederick E. Taylor of Tuxedo, North Carolina; M. E. Marble of Chicago, Illinois; Philip Westin of Irvine, California; John Brosnan of Oradell, New Jersey; John Large of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Dorothy Ann Walker of Ojai, California; Arthur P. Cosing, Jr., of Arlington, Virginia; and Louise Renfroe of Harleton, Texas.

THE LOST DUTCHMAN'S GOLD by Teresa Marie Black

"Eustus Cotton, as sheriff I'm ordering you to stop spreading this bull about some lost prospector's gold."

Seventy-year-old eyes blinked across the fallen tree, trying to look innocent.

"Sheriff, the city-folk down to the huntin' lodge likes them legends 'bout my Grandpappy Cotton. I 'spect some buy my firewood jest to hear how he found the Dutchman's gold mine, and hid the nuggets in a tree on this slope before being kilt by bandits." Eustus gestured to the mammoth fallen tree. "It's hard times, hauling firewood at threescore and ten."

"Joe Billings and Tom Marcus liked your story." The sheriff spit tobacco in the dust. "They grabbed up saws and got a group of drunken hunters up here hacking down sections of trees."

"That's happened before," Eustus said, like he'd just noticed it.

"They got to fighting over whose idea it was, and who was gonna get the gold."

"The tree-hole musta sapped over. Me an' Grandma Cotton never did find them nuggets."

"Both men grabbed up rifles," the sheriff leaned closer.

"I never intended to provoke nobody to violence."

"And now they can ask your grandpappy personally about his gold."

Cotton gulped. "I wondered 'bout that blood in the evergreen. Still, no law agin stories."

"There is now. Eustus, this legend-spreading has gotta stop. You're just gonna have to find some other way to get folks to help you cut firewood."

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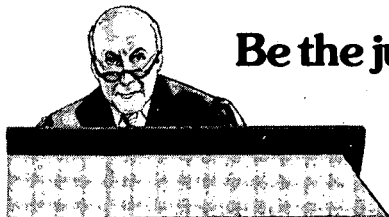
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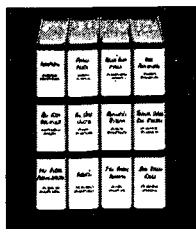
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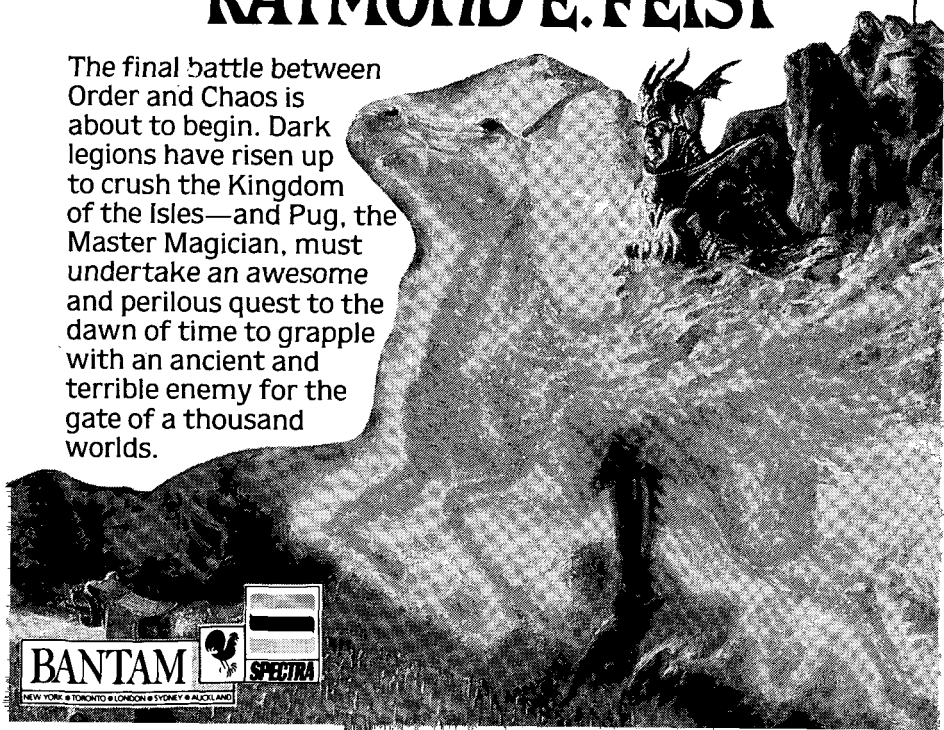
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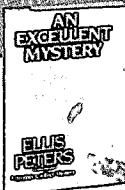
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